



WAS TO REMOVE THEM. EXCERPT FROM
SPEECH EXPRESSION AND ASSEMBLY - UTD
SP5001: TO MAKE AN ARGUMENT FOR OR
AGAINST THE SUBSTANCE OF **ANY POLITICAL**
RELIGIOUS, PHILOSOPHICAL, IDEOLOGICAL
OR ACADEMIC IDEA IS NOT HARASSMENT, EVEN
IF SOME LISTENERS ARE OFFENDED BY THE
ARGUMENT OR IDEA. THE CATEGORIES OF
SEXUALLY HARASSING SPEECH SET FORTH
UTDBP3102 OF THE UT SYSTEM
OF OPERATING
EVER



'CENSORED'

THE SPIRIT ROCKS WERE REMOVED FOR PLATFORMING "EXTENDED POLITICAL DISCOURSE." STUDENTS FEEL SILENCED.



ARE FREE TO EXPRESS THEIR VIEWS, IN
OR IN WRITING OR BY OTHER SYMBOL
SUBJECT ONLY TO RULES NECESSARY TO
AND THE OTHER FUNCTIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY. EMAIL FROM STUDENT AFFAIRS, NOV.
20, 2023: **THE FREEDOM OF SPEECH, EXPRESSION AND ASSEMBLY ARE FUNDAMENTAL**
RIGHTS AND CENTRAL TO THE MISSION OF THE UNIVERSITY, AND THERE ARE
NUMEROUS WAYS FOR STUDENTS TO EXPRESS THEIR OPINIONS. WE ARE PROUD OF
OUR STUDENT BODY AND IT IS OUR HOPE THAT UTD STUDENTS WILL
AND WORLD ISSUES WITH EMPATHY,
OFFICE OF MEDIA RELATIONS ON THE



EMPATHY, KINDNESS AND RESPECT. ARTICLE
ON THE SPIRIT ROCKS, 2008: "WHILE SCHOOL SPIRIT IS HIGHLY
SPORTING EVENTS, IT CAN BE LACKING ELSEWHERE," SAID ANA TAVARES,
STUDENT BODY VICE PRESIDENT. "I HOPE THAT IN PROVIDING THIS **NEW FORM OF**
EXPRESSION, WE CAN HELP UT DALLAS FEEL AND LOOK MORE PERSONAL. I TRULY
BELIEVE THE ROCK WILL BE A TANGIBLE SYMBOL FOR THE **CREATIVITY AND**
INVOLVEMENT OF OUR ENTIRE STUDENT BODY!" SAID DONNA ROGERS, DEAN OF
STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY. "WE HOPE STUDENTS WILL USE THE ROCK NOT ONLY
TO PROMOTE THEIR ORGANIZATIONS AND EVENTS, **BUT THAT THEY ALSO WILL TAKE**
ADVANTAGE OF THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPRESS THEIR ORIGINALITY." EXCERPT FROM



Admin remove Spirit Rocks from campus because of extended political discourse

92% of students disagree with the removal, citing concerns of censorship

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The Spirit Rocks, UTD's preeminent platform for student expression, were removed from campus Nov. 20 after "extended political discourse" about the conflict in Israel and Palestine, raising concerns of censorship.

According to an early morning email from Student Affairs, recent messages on the rocks "have been inconsistent with their original purpose and guidelines," and "extended political discourse" has negatively affected "people on and off campus." The removal comes during a time of political tension on campus. In October, the rocks were painted more than 11 times, alternating between messages supporting Palestine and Israel. On Oct. 12, the rocks were painted with an Israeli flag and the words "We are winning," and on Oct. 14, the rocks were painted with the message "Zionism = Nazism."

The Spirit Rocks received negative attention from CBS News weeks before the removal due to the second message. Days before the removal, another CBS story on student concerns of antisemitism featured a photo of the rocks with graffiti critical of Israel. In a conversation between Dean of Students Amanda Smith and former Student Government Vice President Margaret Belford on the morning of the removal, Smith said that prior messaging on the rocks was "hate speech." Smith declined to comment further when *The Mercury* reached out.

Belford and SG Secretary Alison Spadaro planned to paint the rocks early Nov. 20 for Trans Day of Remembrance, but when they arrived around 9 a.m., the rocks were already gone. The pair grabbed chalk and proceeded to write "CENSORED" on the pavement when Smith approached and asked about the message they were writing. "We can debate the technical meaning of censorship all day, but at the end of the day, it's shutting down students and not letting our voices be heard on campus," Belford said.

Belford said Smith suggested students use alternate methods to express themselves, like posting flyers or tabling at the Plinth. However, Belford pointed out that these are different forms of speech — bulletin board postings are subject to removal at any time, and setting up at the Plinth requires an application and is only allowed in certain locations. UTDSP5001, UTD's policy on "Speech, Expression and Assembly," has robust protection for student expression in all forms across the entire campus, except where rules are needed to "preserve the equal rights of others and the other functions of the University." UTDSP50001 also says that making a political argument

is not harassment, "even if some listeners are offended." "[Zionism equals Nazism] was a strong statement for sure, but was it hate speech? Was it targeted harassment towards individuals? That's debatable, especially with the speed at which it was covered up," Belford said. "The rocks are self-policing. There's a reason that people can paint whatever they like on there ... If people don't like it, they can paint it right back over."

The Spirit Rocks have been part of discourse on controversial political topics since their 2008 inception. As early as 2009, they were painted in support of the Iranian Green Movement. In 2011, they were painted in protest of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange's arrest. In 2015, they were painted in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, and in 2020, they were the location of a smaller paint exchange between supporters of BLM and the "Back the Blue" movement.

The SG website shows the guidelines for painting the Spirit Rocks, which were taken off of their original webpage by Nov. 20. It said students and student organizations are welcome to paint the rocks, provided the messages are in "good taste" and do not violate UTD's Handbook of Operating Procedures, or HOP. In a phone call for *The Mercury's* Oct. 16 story on the Spirit Rocks' politicization, Smith said UTD administrators do not police the content of the rocks and only get involved if messages violate the law or the Student Code of Conduct. It is not clear which policies the recent Spirit Rocks art violated.

Aside from Student Affairs executives, it is unclear what other parties were involved in the decision to remove the rocks. According to the former website, the HOP committee is responsible for recommending and reviewing university policies. However, SG President Srivani Edupuganti said there was no HOP committee meeting about removing the rocks, and that Nov. 20 was the first time SG heard about it.

"They claim to value student input and the student voice, but they took away the only form of student voice or student expression that exists on this campus," Edupuganti said. "These rocks have been removed before the start of the business day, so it's very clear that they were trying to do it as quietly as possible."

In an Instagram poll by *The Mercury*, 92% of the 1,532 respondents said they disagree with the removal, with the most common concern being suppression of free speech. Students took to social media in droves to protest the decision in the days following the initial email. 276 alumni have signed an open letter to admin condemning the decision.

Math junior Alejandro Lizardi, who *The Mercury* spoke with last month about his rock painting efforts, disagreed with the removal.

SEE ROCKS PAGE 9



ANDRÉ AVERION | MERCURY STAFF

At 7:30 a.m., Instagram fan account UTD Rock Wars posted a picture of the missing Spirit Rocks. Later, at 8:01 a.m., Student Affairs released the email announcing the removal of the Spirit Rocks. Around 10:00 a.m., students wrote the word "CENSORED" in sidewalk chalk alongside a Temoc drawing in front of the Activities Center. By 11:48 a.m., landscaping was finished, with new patches of grass and six trees standing where the rocks once were.

SPIRIT ROCK TIMELINE

Nov. 20
UTD staff stand over the site of the Spirit Rocks' removal as trees are installed in their place. Students recieved an email about the removal.



Nov. 21
Students bring their own small replacement stones and write "CENSORED" in chalk on the pavement near the former location of the Spirit Rocks. Within the

day, admin has the stones removed and the chalk washed away.



Nov. 27
Students march through UTD in support of the Spirit Rocks return in the

first demonstration of the Week of Action. Vice President Rafael Martín accompanied by four UTDPD officers observe the peak of the Monday demonstration by the Activity Center.



Nov. 28
The Rainbow Coalition organizes the second day of activism, where

students paint a variety of small stones to be placed with the Spirit Rocks on campus. Around 2:30 p.m., an individual break from the event vandalizes a SU UTDPD is called to the event is relocated to SU green.

Student Government p

MARIA SHAIKH
Mercury Staff

With a unanimous vote and resounding applause, Student Government passed S.R. 2023-08 on Nov. 28, a resolution demanding UTD reinstate the Spirit Rocks.

UTD admin removed the Spirit Rocks from campus on Nov. 20, triggering immediate student backlash, including multiple petitions for SG to push against the decision. Over the following week, SG senator Alexander de Jesus-Colon wrote a resolution demanding that UTD officially restore the rocks, an official retraction of UTD's Spirit Rocks removal statement, and student leadership's involvement in similar future issues. Multiple UTD administrators were present at the Nov. 28 session, including Gene Fitch, vice president of Student Affairs, and Tim Winkle, associate dean of students.

"I can definitely say we were all shocked, none of us had any idea this was coming," SG President Srivani Edupuganti said. "Pretty much the minute we found out about it, people started saying, 'We need to draft a resolution.'"

Outrage over the Spirit Rocks' removal led many to express support for the resolution. Edupuganti said she received many emails and responses to SG's survey soliciting opinions about the removal, and multiple communities she spoke with all expressed hurt and anger. During the Nov. 29 meeting, the visitors section was packed with students, and 11 visitors gave public comments criticizing admin's actions and calling for ratification of the resolution.

"When we used the Spirit Rocks the way they've been used for 15 years, they silenced us because it was co-

A WEE



ALL PHOTOS BY: SHREYA RAVI, SURJADITYA SARKAR, ASHWIN SANGAREDDYPETA | MERCURY STAFF

Top left: students march and paint small rocks to protest the Spirit Rock decision. Top right: A S



A watermelon with an olive branch was drawn on the Plinth pavement during Chalk the Block for Palestine. The watermelon represents the Palestine flag colors.

Hundreds of in-person events protesting the removal of the rocks and protesting in support of more progressive causes on campus. The coalition of events was organized by the Rainbow Coalition. The coalition's first event this month by the Activities Center. The coalition's first event this month by the Activities Center. The coalition's first event this month by the Activities Center.

"We are here again protesting against the removal of the rocks and protesting in support of more progressive causes on campus. The coalition of events was organized by the Rainbow Coalition. The coalition's first event this month by the Activities Center. The coalition's first event this month by the Activities Center. The coalition's first event this month by the Activities Center."

"It is important that people should be open to Palestinians citizen, but we

MY ROCKS

passes resolution demanding Spirit Rocks return

venient for them,” one student said during public comment. “Clearly, this school values its profits over its own students. The drafted Student Government resolution ... is a chance for them to prove otherwise. I support the resolution to return the Spirit Rocks, to hold admin accountable for this tasteless behavior and to begin a tradition of admin listening to and uplifting student voices.”

The resolution states that the Spirit Rocks have historically platformed political viewpoints with administration’s full approval, contrasting sharply against their removal for previous weeks’ “extended political discourse” and leaving “no means for accessible, unmoderated free expression comparable to that afforded by the Spirit Rocks.” Before making decisions impacting student expression, the resolution calls on UTD to communicate with SG to ensure students’ desires are heard.

“The removal of the Spirit Rocks marks a veritable turducken of cowardice wrapped in ignorance wrapped in the sort of arrogance that can only exist in somebody who believes they are beholden to no one.”

“The removal of the Spirit Rocks marks a veritable tur-

ducken of cowardice wrapped in ignorance wrapped in the sort of arrogance that can only exist in somebody who believes they are beholden to no one,” another student said during public comment.

One article in the resolution states the Spirit Rocks’ removal reflects “a pattern of marginalized groups reporting harm from a lack of administrative transparency, accountability and sensitivity,” emphasizing the disproportionate impact campus minorities suffered. De Jesus-Colon said the queer community felt especially impacted, as the rocks were removed during Trans Day of Remembrance.

“We wanted first to point out that historically, marginalized groups on campus as a whole had numerous issues in the past of administration ignoring them, not fully meeting their needs, or going halfway,” De Jesus-Colon said. “We wanted to establish a precedent that [multiple

groups] feel aggrieved by what is happening, not just simply because of the removal of a community forum, but also because they felt the administration’s reasoning was lacking, to say the least.”

Echoing sentiments expressed by students, the resolution declares UTD’s decision politically biased. Highlighted among the marginalized groups who feel historically disrespected by administration are Muslim and Arab students, for whom the rock’s removal was part of recent, specific neglect by admin. Edupuganti clarified this pattern includes President Richard Benson’s Oct. 16 letter expressing sympathy for Israeli casualties.

“The Spirit Rocks removal hurts everyone, but it was undeniably aimed at speech that was heavily engaged in by Muslim and Arab students, and the removal almost

SEE **SG** PAGE 9

WEEK OF PROTEST

The removal of the Spirit Rocks causes student uproar and continued conflict between activists and university admin

student writes down a list of each date Israel took violent action in Palestine during Wednesday's chalk demonstration. Students collaborated to draw an immense Palestinian flag filled in with the names of killed Gazans.

RIA SHAIKH
Mercury Staff

passioned Comets participated in a week protesting the Spirit Rocks’ Nov. 20 removal, the Progressive Student Coalition.

on, also known as PSC, was formed earlier by a group of student organizations to primarily calling for the reinstatement of Palestine. The PSC has organized protests, sessions, which interpret the removal of the pro-Palestinian student voices.

against the parasitic administration and their speaker from the Young Democratic Socialists n, fighting against the administration and

day, Nov. 27 at 2:30 p.m., where over 150 rocks’ former location to protest the removal. a different student broke away from the manner with spray paint. Dozens of students n, with many participants wearing keffiyehs they arrived at the front of the Administra-

labeled, fired from our jobs and censored,” alumnus Mohammad Shalabi said. “By choosing to remove the Spirit Rocks, they are choosing to take a stance against peaceful protesting and silencing our voices. But it will not stop us from speaking up.”

The next day, the Rainbow Coalition — which focuses on LGBTQ+ advocacy — held a stone-painting event at 2 p.m. Students painted small stones with Palestinian flags, gay rights flags and other messages and scattered them on the plot of grass where the Spirit Rocks used to stand.

“Obviously, removing the rocks doesn’t remove our free speech — we can still talk — but I feel like it’s a step toward repression of ideas because it was subjective,” chemistry sophomore Lillian Owings said. “If the concern truly was ‘we don’t want any political messaging on there,’ these rocks would’ve been gone long before I came here.”

On Wednesday, Nov. 29, the National Day of Action for Palestine, SJP organized “Chalk the Block” in affiliation with PSC, where students covered the entire Plinth in pro-Palestine chalk art. While the event was planned before the rocks’ removal, over 200 participants contributed inrecord attendance. ATEC sophomore Chengyang Zhou collaborated with other participants on a large piece that created a Palestinian flag out of the names of killed Gazans.

“I actually come from a family of activists, revolutionaries ... So I really resonated with the Palestinian sentiment, the desire to not be under occupation, and

SEE **ACTION** PAGE 9



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SGA
During the Nov. 28 SG meeting, students speak for the entire public comment period, mainly to support the Spirit Rocks’ reinstatement. S.R. 2023-08 is passed in support of the rocks’

return and requests for admin to consult student leadership before taking actions which negatively affect student expression.

Nov. 29
At the Pizza with the VP event, Vice President of Student Affairs Gene Fitch is approached by multiple students expressing discontent with his recent activity regarding the Spirit Rocks. Fitch

was recorded saying, "I'm standing here serving pizza, thank you," as he avoided responding to a student's remarks.

was quickly removed. Slogans in support of Palestine and the Spirit Rocks covered the Plinth, with students collaborating to complete projects such as a list of those described as martyrs by SJP.

Chalk
Throughout the day, over 200 students engaged in Chalk the Block at the Plinth, where a body bag demonstration was also hosted by SJP. Chalk used outside of the administration building



THE MERCURY
UTDMERCURY.COM

Volume XXIII
No. 12
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The Mercury is published on Mondays, at two-week intervals during the long term of The University of Texas at Dallas, except holidays and exam periods, and once every four weeks during the summer term.

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TIPA
The Mercury is a proud member of both the Associated Collegiate Press and the Texas Intercollegiate Press Association.

Holiday Events

Family Friendly Events for the Winter Season

ICE! How the Grinch Stole Christmas: Tickets available through December

Walk through the Gaylord Texan ice sculpture park carved out of 2 million pounds of ice. The park will be Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer-themed and present various scenes from the original stop-motion animation television special. The sculptures will portray characters such as Hermey the Elf and the Abominable Snowman alongside Rudolph. Adult tickets go for \$37.99 while children's tickets are \$27.99. If you'd rather skip out on the ice, the Gaylord hotel is free to enter with many opportunities for Christmas photo ops.

Heard Natural Science Museum & Wildlife Sanctuary: December 8, 6.00 p.m.

Enjoy a half-mile nighttime hike through a nature sanctuary with holiday lights and decor, leading to an outdoor amphitheater playing live music under the stars. You can even see the dinosaur exhibit on the trail. Adult tickets go for \$15 while children's tickets go for \$10.

Minna Holiday Art Market: December 16, 12:00 p.m.

Visit a popular artist alley featuring independent artists and small businesses located at the Denton Civic Center. A wide variety of items are sold, including original art, fanart, plushies, homemade cosmetics and boba tea. Attendance is free but artist pricing will vary.

Deerfield Festive Neighborhood: Available through December

Drive through the Plano subdivision Deerfield to see some of the most extravagant Christmas decor in Texas. The entire neighborhood makes their yards seem straight out of Santa's workshop with bright lights and large props. Entry is free, just drive on in!

Christmas Workout Bootcamp - December 13, 6:15 p.m.

Participate in this group exercise class to promote the charity program Toys for Tots, which collects and distributes toys to disadvantaged children during the holiday season. Entry for this workout class is free with a toy donation.



RAINIER PEDERSON | WEB EDITOR



GRACE COWGER | MERCURY STAFF

From The Mercury Archives: December 9, 1985

Poetry

St. Nicholas Visits The Merc

By Song of Bird in Many Trees

Twas the night of production, when all through the Merc
Not a writer was stirring, an oft-noted quirk;
The boards were all laid on the tables with care,
In hopes that paste-up artists soon would be there.
The staff were nestled all snug in their chairs,
While versions of headlines danced in their prayers;
And Kathryn in her kerchief, and in my cap,
Had just settled our tongues for a long winter's rap.
When out in the hall there arose such a clatter,
I sprang from my chair to see what was the matter.
Away to the door I flew like a tide,
Tore open the knob and dashed inside.
The ink on slick not yet scarcely dry
Told who, what, where, when and even why, And,

what to my wandering eyes should appear,
Length after length of copy so dear,
With a little old message at the very end,
I knew in a moment it was what Johnnye would send.
More rapid than eagles my eyes scanned the sheet,
And I whistled, and shouted, and called it so neat:
"Now columns! now ads! now Senate news!
On stories! on features! but no ads for booze!
Turn on the waxer is the clarion call!
Now wax away! wax away! wax away all!"
As dry leaves that before the wild hurricane fly,
When they meet with an obstacle, mount to the sky,
So into the workroom the slick it flew,
To be trimmed and measured and proofread too.
And then, in a twin-

bling, I heard the phone ring
A reporter, to say her story she'd bring.
As I replaced the phone, and was turning around,
Through the doorway St Nicholas came with a bound.
He was dressed all in denim, cowboy boots on his feet
With hat and beard both white, he did us greet;
A bundle of Copy he had clutched in his hand
And to news people, he looked just grand
His phrases -how they twinkled! his similes how merry!
His facts were like roses, his prose like a cherry!
His droll little witticisms so funny,
And none, not one, of his sentences was runny;
The front page slick he held tight in his fist,
And the story it encircled his head like a mist;
The bylines and photo

credits he had,
And the page numbers to make our hearts glad.
He was chubby and plump, no blue pencil he,
And Ruth laughed when she saw him, laughed with glee;
A wink of his eye and a smile so wry
Gave her no reason to sigh, sigh, sigh.
He spoke not a word, but went straight to the dummy,
The heads he laid; rubber cement un-gummy,
Then with his index finger so slightly bent,
Having, helped us, out the door he went;
He sprang to his pickup, with hubs turned in,
And away he drove, leaving us a grin.
But I heard him exclaim, as in the darkness he did lurk,
"Happy Christmas to all, and good night to the Merc."

COMETS PROTEST IN CAPITAL FOR CEASEFIRE, HOSTAGE RELEASE

SJP traveled to Austin for Palestine, Hillel and Chabad traveled to Washington, D.C. for Israel, and LULAC and UTD Democrats traveled to Washington, D.C. to advocate for immigrant workers



GREGORIO OLIVARES GUTIERREZ
News Editor

Comets joined thousands of students protesting in Austin, Washington D.C., and across the nation this November in support of immigrant workers' rights, a ceasefire in Gaza and the release of Israeli hostages.

Political student organizations including UTD's chapters of College Democrats, League of United Latin American Citizens, or LULAC, Hillel, Chabad and Students for Justice in Palestine have all sent student activists across the country. UTD College Democrats works to encourage political participation through voter registration drives and meetings with local politicians; most recently, members attended the Nov. 18 to 10 National Here to Work Day of Action, or NHWDA, in Washington. Also present at NHWDA were 12 members from LULAC, which hosts cultural events and attends summits and protests that advocate for the rights of millions of marginalized immigrants. Hillel and Chabad work with students and administration to address matters affecting Jewish students; 3 of their students attended the Nov. 14 March for Israel. SJP works to educate students about the Palestinian plight while also organizing student demonstrations like Nov. 29's Chalk the Block and the Nov. 12 Austin protest for Palestine.

Political science senior Daniel Gal-

legos Banda, who participates in several political causes on campus, said involvement in student organizations serves as a crucial part of the college experience that goes beyond academic learning.

"Once you start to get involved you meet people who can help amplify your voice and show you that you can now help others enter this world they might not have been exposed to yet," Gallegos said.

Gallegos is a member of LULAC, UTD College Democrats, the John Marshall Pre-law Society and SJP. He participated in student organizing efforts like voter registration drives and Hispanic cultural celebrations with LULAC and UTD Dems. Gallegos attended SJP protests that call for an end to the conflict in Palestine, such as the one held on Oct. 25, and engaged in congressional activism in Washington during the NHWDA.

"The [NHWDA] summit helped us network with people across the nation facing the same issue of work permits," Meadow Pena, president of UTD College Democrats, said.

The UTD LULAC chapter sent 12 students to the NHWDA to advocate for improved work permit and immigration laws. Pena said a driving factor of the protest was the immediate danger and fear immigrants face of being separated from their families. President of LULAC Nathalia Patricio, Pena and Gallegos all said that cooperating with organizations like



Above: tens of thousands of people gathered for the March for Israel in Washington on Nov. 14, advocating for the release of Israeli hostages and condemning anti-semitism.

Below: members of LULAC pose for a photo at National Here to Work Day of Action. From left to right: Tomas Rubealcaba, Laila Rodriguez, Abril Piña, Camila Estrada, David Cantu and Daniel Gallegos Banda.

the national and neighboring chapters of LULAC, The Resurrection Project and Dreamers of Today allowed them to participate by funding their travel.

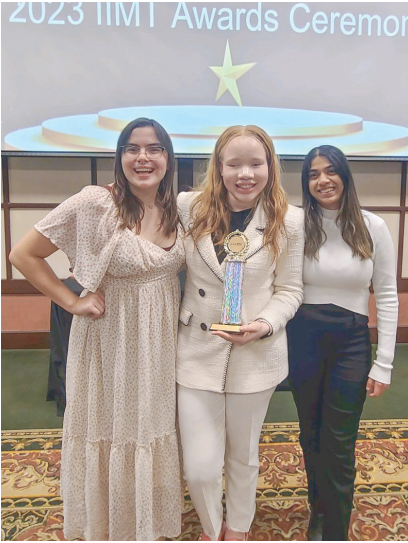
"Political advocacy helps calm my nerves because, when successful, it lets me know that families like my own won't be torn apart by all these bad laws people try to pass," Patricio said.

Pena said that while in Washington, they met with congressional rep-

resentatives that were in office during the weekend — and primarily with Democratic politicians — to speak about their cause and the approaches that could be taken to implement it. Patricio said her voice is often unheard on campus, but attending a national protest made her feel a sense of self-efficacy and strength.

"When you have the right resources and the right connection, there is

SEE PROTESTS, PAGE 8



TONY SEAGROVES | COURTESY
The three first-place champions, from left to right: Isabella Spartz, Michelle Elele and Sanjana Chandrasekar. Chandrasekar has personally placed in first for the second year in a row.

Mediation places No. 1 in international competition

ZARA JAMSHED
Mercury Staff

UTD's Mediation team ranked No. 1 at the International Alternative Dispute Resolution tournament from Nov. 9 to Nov. 11, taking first place for the fourth consecutive year and the fifth time in the past nine years.

After winning at the IADR in Gainesville, GA, the three first-place champions, Michelle Elele, Sanjana Chandrasekar and Isabella Spartz now qualify for an international tournament at Loyola Law School on March 6. Mediation is typically court ordered by a judge to find a resolution before a case goes to trial, and this year, topics included the 100-day actor strike, conflicts between the winner and host of a fishing tournament, and the mistreatment of a dog by a dog boarding company.

A second team including Edward Zhang, Juan Castro and Marquis Nickerson placed No. 8 for advocate/client, and Zhang and Nickerson won an individual fifth place award for advocate/client pair. This was an international tournament, with 22 teams participating from across the world. Spartz, a finance and economics senior, is currently in her first year of competing in mediation.

"It was really exciting because I think it was something we all weren't expecting ... I think it was one of those things [where we thought], 'Oh, we knew we could do it,' but there's that small percentage in your head where you're like, 'I don't know if I can,'" Spartz said.

At UTD, Mediation is offered as an extracurricular activity, where students role-play to negotiate a dispute between two clients. During each round, there are two mediators who resolve the issue, each from a different school, and two advocate-client pairs who act as the conflicting parties. Coach Tony Seagroves has been with the team for nine years; during his time, Mediation has placed first five times internationally. Key to the team's strategy is ensuring that students stay in character and only act within their roles — for example, teams lose points if the client tries to mediate the round instead of the mediator.

"It's to the point now where when we go to competitions, the other teams are afraid to go against us," Seagroves said. "We're the big gorilla in the room."

Elele is a political science junior in her third year of competing in Mediation. She will be moving on to the Loyola Law School Competition in March, where the competition will be even tougher.

"[The contest is] all with law schools ... and maybe two to three undergraduate schools are going to be there," Elele said. "So [I'm] very nervous, but I'm also very excited too, because it's going to be a learning experience."

Edward Zhang, an economics senior, is in his third year of competing in Mediation. Zhang said mediators should be able to diffuse stressful situations, but the advocate and client should focus more on accurately portraying their characters.

"For the advocates ... they need to have a really strong grasp of the logistical facts of the case," Zhang said. "On the other hand, the client should know what's important to them, and they should be a little bit more emotional."

Before a competition, five fact lists are released. For this tournament, issues to mediate included a mass actors' strike, a

SEE MEDIATION, PAGE 8

Alumnus Jacky Chao inspiring young content creators

Launched in 2021, 'Creator Camp' trains kids ages 6-13 in filmmaking, studio AI and creative AI



On right — co-founders of Creator Camp, from left to right: Cazden Morrison, Robbie Davidson, Jacky Chao, Winston Cadenas and Kai Forman.

SAI ADRRA TRIVEDI
Mercury Staff

UTD alumnus Jacky Chao has turned his tech dream into a reality. From filming short movie clips inside the gym to getting featured on The Washington Post for their content creation camp, Chao and four high school friends are using their love for all things tech to inspire a new generation of creators.

Chao, who majored in ATEC, is making waves in the tech industry with Creator Camp, started in summer 2021 with co-founders Kai Forman, Cazden Morrison, Winston Cadenas and Robbie Davidson. Creator Camp got its start by winning \$25,000 at UTD's Big Ideas Competition, where students from all education levels pitch their start-up ideas; this seed money has fueled financial aid and the camp's expansion into Dallas. Kids ages 6-13 learn skills like filmmaking, studio animation and creative AI in two or three-day camps priced at \$150 and \$230 respectively. At the camp, students make use of creative mediums like green screens and Minecraft coding modules. The idea of Creator Camp came to the co-founders when they noticed a lack

of expressive technology-related activities in high school.

"There wasn't really a lot of creative or technology-focused classes," Chao said. "Everything was very academic. It's either academic or very sports ... we felt like outcasts."

Even with no formal business training, the co-founders were able to build a company from the ground up. The team drew early inspiration from their high school teacher, Mr. Kolkman, who stayed after hours to support their projects and offered to chaperone when they filmed short films.

The five founders have integrated experience from each of their educations into the knowledge they impart on campers. Morrison's degree in film from UT Austin gave him an experimental outlook while designing the filmmaking curriculum for Creator Camp, urging campers to explore new ways to tell stories visually. Forman's degree in game programming proved useful in making course curriculum for gaming.

"The industry is always changing. We want the instructors to be up to date with the industry trends and what is more im-



PHOTOS: JACKY CHAO | COURTESY

portant, software or passion," Chao said.

Though the students at Creator Camp have creative moments, Chao said teamwork proves to be an issue at times. When successful, collaboration works wonders for the students' creativity and capacity to execute their ideas. Even though working in teams can sometimes be difficult for the children, once they hit a sweet spot, the project comes together.

"Some of the young kids get distracted while the older ones want to continue on. But for the most part, they all make awesome stuff," Davidson said.

During his time at UTD, Chao took guidance from David Marks, a professor of sound production, and Eric Farrar, his capstone professor. He was influenced by both advice on practical aspects of sound design as well as the professors' philosophies on work and art.

"Farrar taught me to be kind to myself and my ideas during production, to remember that the process should always be enjoyable," Chao said. "Marks ... challenged me to focus more on details, think about the qualities and characteristics of each instrument and how that affects the overall piece."

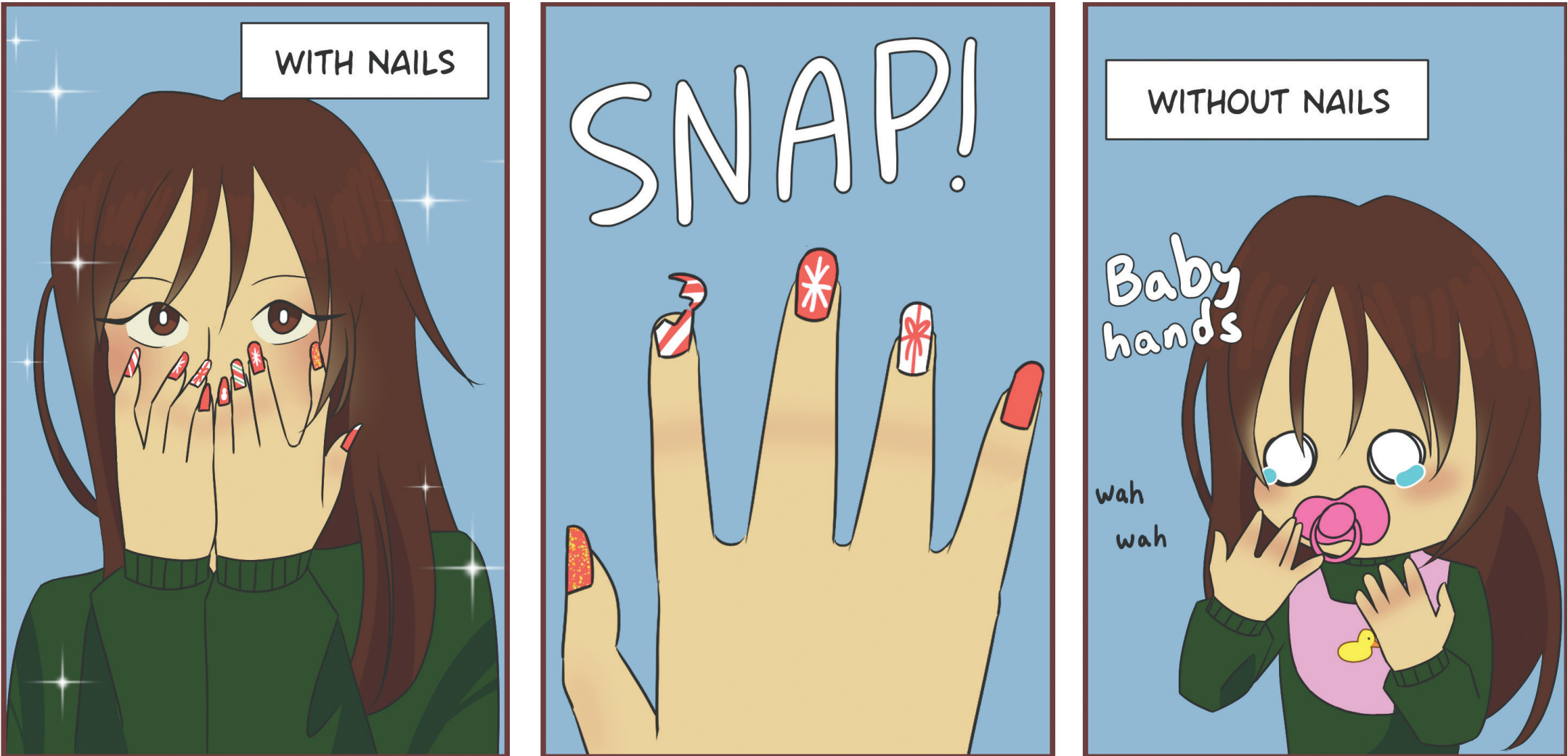
Creator Camp currently has locations in Houston, Dallas, Austin and San Antonio, with plans to expand to Salt Lake City and Denver as well as international locations like Australia. Additionally, Creator Camp hopes to implement guidance counseling programs for high school students who want to get into art colleges by helping them create their art portfolios.

"What I want to impart to the kids is not just how do you do a stop motion animation, but it's more inspiring for them to use these tools to tell big ideas," Chao said.

While they weren't given many opportunities to grow creatively in their youth, these five friends hope to inspire others who wish to start their own business and pursue their own passions. For Morrison, it's important to keep a hold of possibility and venture toward it.

"For us, at least, whenever we started the camp, we could have asked a million questions and did not have the answers and then decided not to start the camp," Morrison said. "Once we got going, it was easy to figure those things out and just took us committing and then doing it."

BABY HANDS



RACHEL WOON | MERCURY STAFF

BAG-GUY AND LIYA



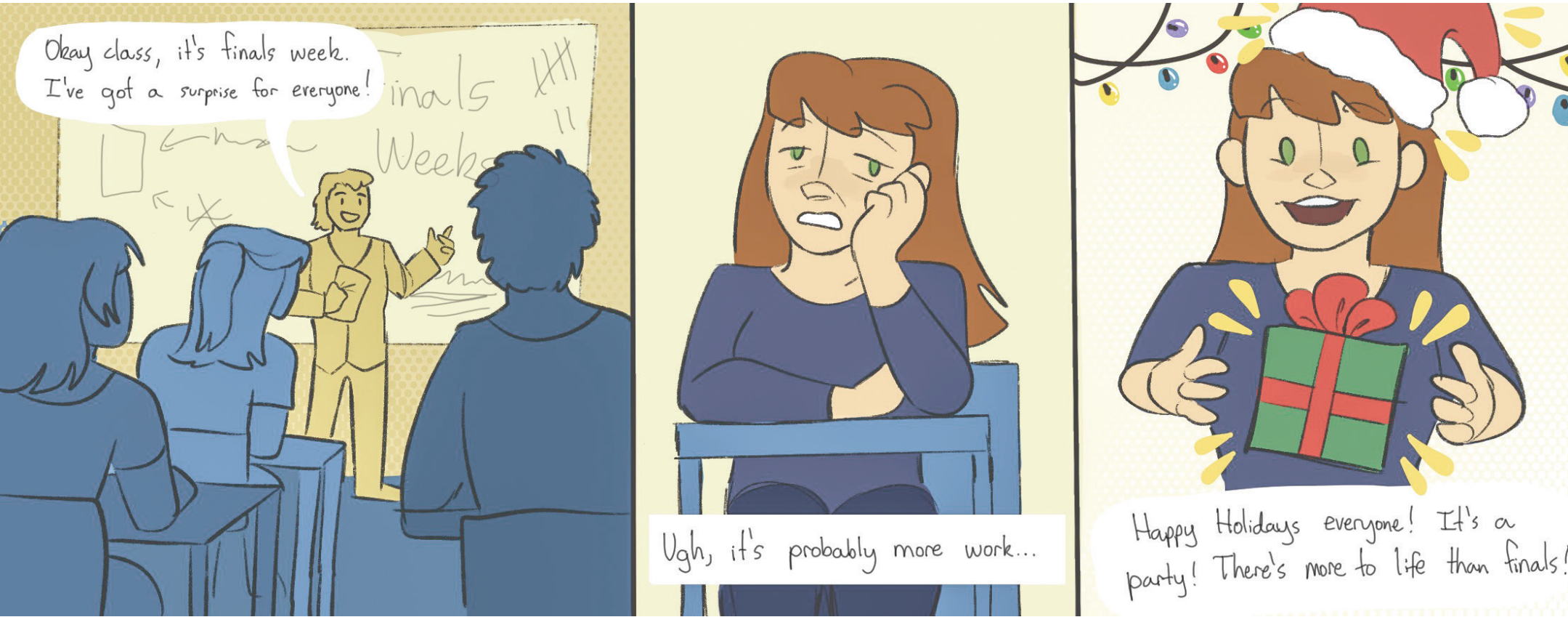
ANDREW PETERS | MERCURY STAFF

IT'S THE MOST "WONDERFUL" TIME OF THE YEAR



YI YI DING | MERCURY STAFF

A HOLIDAY MIRACLE



ERIN GUTSCHKE | MERCURY STAFF

CHES PACMAN

Rules: Black to move. Use the black knight to take all of the white pawns one after another, without touching an empty square.

CHES PUZZLE BY AAFIYA ASLAM | MERCURY STAFF
CHES PIECES BY YIYI DING | MERCURY STAFF

Medium level: A Rook within a Rook



Medium-Difficult level: The Indecisive Rook



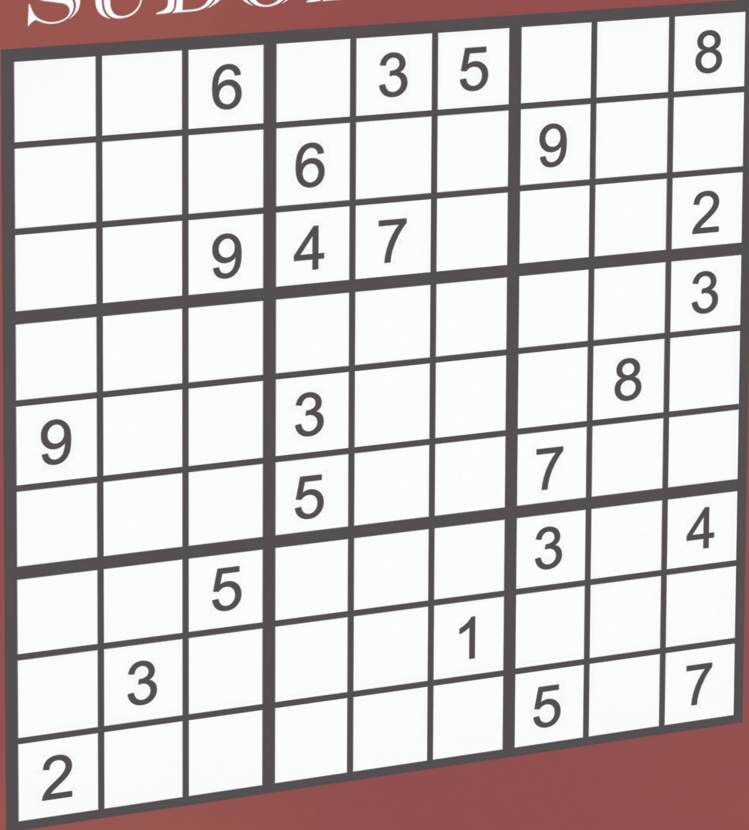
NORTH POLE



STRENGTH IN
NUMBERS KEY

11.13
SUDOKU KEY

SUDOKU 12.04



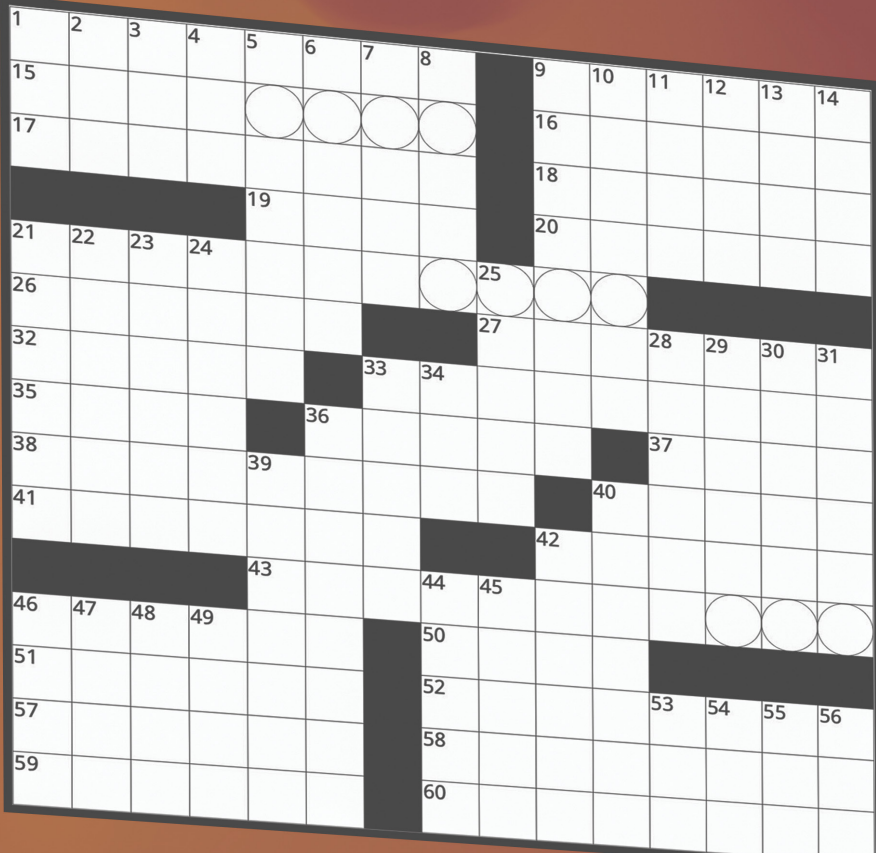
ACROSS

- 1 Holders of tiny mirrors
- 9 U.S. capital region
- 15 Strike a forceful blow with the forehead
- 16 Incendiary acts
- 17 German ship lost in the Battle of the River Plate, 1939
- 18 Descend again
- 19 Seine feeder
- 20 Past, present and future
- 21 "The Art of the Deal" author
- 26 You can count on it
- 27 Chewy confections
- 32 Day's opposite
- 33 Unthinking state
- 35 Rae who plays President Barbie in "Barbie"
- 36 Of an arm bone
- 37 Unadorned
- 38 Ignition system device
- 40 Slangy sibling
- 41 Dumpster fire
- 42 Did a dairy farm chore
- 43 Tech specs?
- 46 Italian cheese
- 50 Property claim
- 51 Guys driving public transportation
- 52 Waiting space
- 57 Rubbernecking
- 58 Hits from behind... or an apt descriptor of 15a, 21a, and 43a
- 59 George the first?
- 60 Goes whole hog on Thanksgiving

DOWN

- 1 Small fee?
- 2 Not 'neath
- 3 Kid's cry
- 4 Adobe file format
- 5 Smirnoff competitor
- 6 Figures on some Valentine's Day cards
- 7 Tool for statistical comparison
- 8 Take the wheel
- 9 Protected park in southwestern England known for its tors
- 10 Approach with stealth
- 11 Org.
- 12 Profit percentages
- 13 Feminine suffix
- 14 Requests
- 21 Breakfast pastry
- 22 San Luis ____
- 23 Pestors
- 24 "Works like ____!"
- 25 Remove from a social media post
- 28 Vet-assisting legislation of 1944
- 29 49th state
- 30 Rich cakes
- 31 Places ____ sudden!"
- 33 "This is ____ sudden!"
- 34 Burma's first prime minister
- 36 Awake earlier
- 39 Some fraternity parties
- 40 Parties to a contract
- 42 Use for a rendezvous
- 44 Angry look
- 45 First blank on a form
- 46 Simple rhyme scheme
- 47 Guinean tribal group
- 48 Cult followers?
- 49 Asian nurse
- 53 Mens ____; type of criminal intent
- 54 Toronto's prov.
- 55 Mileage meter prefix
- 56 AOL alternative

CIRCLE BACK



The Thomsen Fund: Connecting Comets to world-class art

Through the Honors College, students can receive free tickets to the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, the Dallas Opera and more

GREGORIO OLIVARES GUTIERREZ
News Editor

Computer science junior Kenneth Antilla finds himself within the arts district of Dallas again for his 25th event, this time listening to the beautiful sounds of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. Along with dozens of other students, he can do this for free each month thanks to the Thomsen fund.

The Thomsen Fund is a program that provides free tickets to artistic events, available to all UTD students. The fund is administered by the Hobson Wildenthal Honors College, overseen by Dean Donal Skinner, and typically gives out tickets on the second Wednesday of each month at 8:15 a.m. in the Green Center. Events include performances by the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, the Dallas Opera, the TITAS Dance series and

more. Students should arrive early if they have event preferences, as lines regularly form an hour or more before the distribution. Skinner said the fund typically distributes 2,500 to 3,000 tickets each year.

“I feel that the vision on this endowment was incredible,” Skinner said. “It is not just investing in the theater, symphony or opera, but it is investing in the future of these arts by allowing students to go to these events for perhaps the very first time in their lives.”

Antilla feels that the fund has allowed him to experience art that is otherwise inaccessible to him because of the financial barrier: tickets to each event can range between \$25 and \$90 each, and that does not include the cost

of transportation downtown. Skinner said

the fund is self-sustaining because of accrued interest, allowing it to continue to distribute tickets for decades to come. Skinner said that this is made possible by an endowment of \$32 million made in 2000 by Margaret McDermott in honor of former Texas Instruments CFO Carl J. Thomsen.

“This is not only a fund open to all students at UT Dallas, but it is the most incredible gift that has been given to the university,” Skinner said. “You come to university to get educated, in all facets of the mind, and this gift deeply enables that.”

The Honors College has overseen the fund since 2012. The fund works to make events accessible to students by having multiple ticket options and announcements

on social media; any leftover

tickets are distributed on a first-come, first-serve basis. In case of scheduling issues, the Honors College allows students to return tickets and exchange them with other Comets. Announcements about ticket availability are regularly posted in the Thomsen Fund Tickets Teams channel.

Antilla attends Thomsen Fund events every

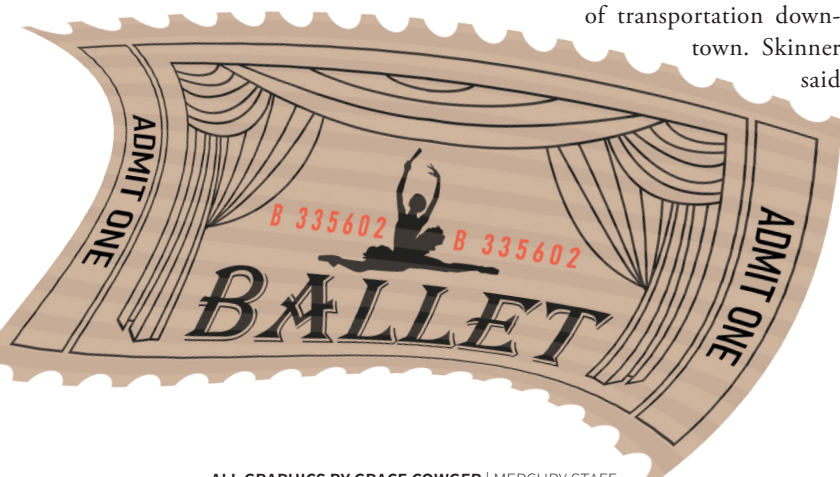
“When you get tickets through the Thomsen fund, you get 2 tickets, so you can either bring a friend and have a really good shared experience or get a nice date for free,” Antilla said.

In their time at UTD, physics junior Bronwen Olsen has used the Thomsen fund to attend over 30 events including operas, plays, dances and symphonies. The tickets have helped them meet their

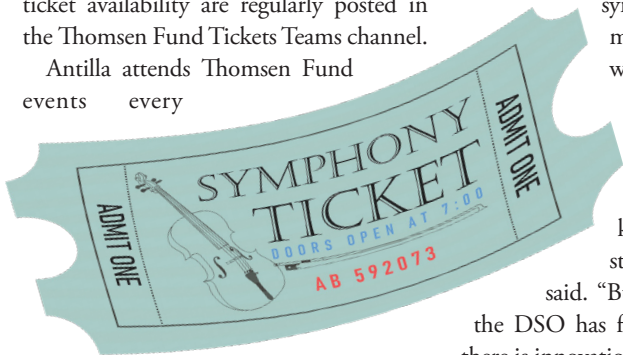
symphony viewing requirements as a music minor, with Dallas Symphony Orchestra performing both modern and classical music.

“Classical music is kind of known for being stuck in the past,” Olsen said. “But I think it is great that

the DSO has facilitated me seeing that there is innovation happening in this space due to modern composers, and I get to see all of it due to the fund.”



ALL GRAPHICS BY GRACE COWGER | MERCURY STAFF



month because he loves how symphonies allow him to be

Rookie Preview flips the script on sales program

The contest, required for marketing majors, will now give students more opportunities to network with companies

NISHA PHILIPS
Mercury Staff

UTD’s Pro Sales Concentration revealed plans for a revamp of Rookie Preview, its sales role-play scholarship mandatory for marketing majors. The new program, starting in spring, will give marketing students the opportunity to personally network with top companies.

Rookie Preview is an opportunity for marketing students to kickstart their careers in the competitive field of sales. The competition, hosted by the Center for Professional Sales, has drawn judges from top companies including IBM, State Farm, Oracle, Adobe, HPE and Liberty Mutual; students who perform well in the competition have a chance to get recruited for sales by these companies. Rookie Preview is part of Introduction to Professional Selling or MKT 3330, a mandatory course for marketing majors, where participants use what they have learned to present a 15-minute sales pitch to a representative of a participating company. Winners receive sales scholarships of \$1,000, which are awarded to them during the fall or spring Rookie Preview Awards Dinner.

“The [Center of Professional Sales] exists for the sole purpose of connecting the students with the industry,” director Howard Dover said.

After COVID-19, participation declined — only about 20-30 percent of students and companies invited attended the Awards Dinner, according to Dover, and students were able to opt out of the competition through an alternate assignment. Now, the Center for Professional Sales is changing the program format to increase interaction with participating companies. Semiramis Amirpour, a professor of instruction of MKT 3330, said the new format will incorporate networking events immediately

“If I had a penny for every time a student came back and said that Rookie Preview has changed [their] life, I would be rich.”
— Semiramis Amirpour

after the competition in the morning instead of much later in the evening at dinner time. The new competition will also have multiple buyers, allowing students to network with multiple companies instead of just one.

“COVID changed the view of work-

into the evening,” Dover said. “Corporations are of the view that we aren’t going to make our people go to a dinner at 9 to recruit people.”

Sales alumnus Hermon Afewor said participating in the Rookie Preview in spring 2017 helped him land an internship at Liberty Mutual. Afewor, who now works at Beck Technologies, said Rookie Preview helped him build skills by simulating a professional sales environment with real stakes.

“Rookie Preview put me in front of every person that I have now worked with,” Afewor said. “It gave them the chance to look beyond my resume, by seeing them face to face and getting to interact with them.”

Dover said UTD was among only 15 universities with a program like Rookie Preview 10 years ago, but now about 200 similar programs exist, including at Texas A&M and Kennesaw State University. This creates a challenge for com-

panies, making it difficult for them to decide which university event to attend. Previously, students were not able to meet judges outside of the competition, which made networking more difficult, bringing about the decision to change the format.

“If I had a penny for every time a student came back and said that Rookie Preview has changed [their] life,” Amirpour said, “I would be rich.”



SHREYA RAVI | MERCURY STAFF

At Rookie Preview, hosted on Dec. 1, students had to present a 15-minute sales pitch to an industry professional.

MEDIATION CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

dispute over a fishing tournament prize, a family demanding reparations from a company for hurting their dog, two parents fighting against park privatization and two cousins disagreeing on their inheritance. During Spartz’s final round, her team mediated a dispute between a fictional actor’s union who went on a 100-day strike against film producers. They had to negotiate real-world issues like demands for equitable compensation and the dangers of AI in replicating actors’ images.

Elele said being on UTD’s team helped her narrow down her future goals to pursue mediation in law school. Even for those who will not go on to a position in mediation, the program helps students develop skills in negotiation, conflict resolution and public speaking.

“The spirit of mediation [is] cooperation rather than conflict ... that’s a very useful skill to have, no matter where you want to work in the future,” Zhang



TONY SEAGROVES | COURTESY

The second UTD team, from left to right: Edward Zhang, Juan Castro and Marquis Nickerson.

said. Students are chosen for competition through seniority and demonstrated interest in the program. Interested students should reach out to Coach Sea-

groves and attend the yearly Mediation orientation.

“If you’re able to do that, you’re able to do anything else you want,” Spartz said.

PROTESTS CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

more of a possibility for you to bring about change,” Patricio said.

Mechanical engineering graduate student Andrew Glick and two other UTD students traveled to the Nov. 14 March for Israel rally in Washington after receiving support from Hillel and Chabad to attend in support of Israel. Glick enjoyed meeting with others from varied backgrounds at the march, which gathered a crowd in the tens of thousands. Glick said he was happy to use his student voice in meetings with administration that had been conducted by Hillel and Chabad, and he planned on attending upcoming meetings as well.

“Sometimes when people want someone to acknowledge their pain, they feel as if the only way is to bring down another group,” Glick said. “It’s almost like it is expected that only one group can be in pain, and I don’t think that that is

right. It is important to foster an environment where we can acknowledge others’ pain without bringing others down.”

Since October, SJP has organized multiple protests on campus in support of hu-

“These events have been life changing, so why not give change a chance?”

— Daniel Gallegos Banda

manitarian relief and peace in Palestine. On Nov. 12, SJP members attended a protest supporting Palestine in Austin with over 15,000 people in attendance. SJP secretary and healthcare management

senior Nour Saad was one of those in attendance, and she was particularly impressed by the compassion demonstrated at the event.

“Whenever people needed medical attention or help, the crowd would shift its chants and ask for help until even the person at the speaker would join and alert the medical tent,” Saad said. “And the medics made their way over by following the directions of the crowd. It really struck me that even in this huge crowd, we were taking care of each other as a community.”

The protest called for an immediate ceasefire to the ongoing conflict in Palestine and for an end to U.S. aid to Israel. The organizers believe this was one of the largest protests in support of Palestine in Texas history.



SHREYA RAVI | MERCURY STAFF

ACTION
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

the desire to ignore being talked down upon,” Zhou said.

Starting at 3 p.m. and continuing past sunset, students wrote slogans and drew artwork. Some creations demanded the Spirit Rocks return while many expressed solidarity for Palestine, by drawing the flag, cultural symbols like olives, and watermelons — a replacement for the Palestinian flag in countries where the symbol is banned. The two largest drawings featured the names of those killed in Palestine since Oct. 7 and recorded all the outbreaks of violence in the region since Israel’s founding in 1948. SJP leadership reminded participants not to obstruct pathways or engage in hateful speech and read aloud the biographies of dead Palestinians, as law enforcement and UTD administrators watched from the sidelines.

“First, we have a message to administration that although you continue to silence the student body, the student body will continue to speak, especially in terms of Palestine,” Nour Saad, SJP secretary and healthcare management senior, said. “The entire [Plinth] is filled with words, with drawings, with chants that speak out for our wish for freedom, with dates of all the recorded incidents against Palestinians with flags and even with the names of the martyrs ... They’re here, and they’re spoken, and their stories are being told so that administration sees that we are not going to stay silent.”

On Thursday, Nov. 30, Young Democratic Socialists of America organized an informational presentation about the history of the Spirit Rocks, highlighting the political messages that students painted on the rocks between 2008 and 2023. Around 30 students from PSC-affiliated organizations gathered for the presentation. Ayed Abushaar, president of YDSA, argued the removal was part of a pattern of UTD opposing pro-Palestinian sentiments, starting with

Benson publicly distancing himself from SG’s divestment resolution. He said this has recently extended into suppressing student expression, such as via removing the Spirit Rocks and students’ chalk drawings.

“I went and I chalked ‘free Palestine’ in front of the admin building, and I hadn’t finished ‘free’ until there was a truck next to me,” Abushaar said. “Workers [got] out, saying ‘We have to erase this’ ... I moved to a different part of admin and within a few minutes of me chalking there, police roll up ... [positioning] themselves between me and admin.”

Comets’ vehement response to the Spirit Rocks’ removal comes during a period of tension between students and universities. UT Austin students successfully challenged their university’s restrictive free speech policies in 2020, while Columbia University faced student opposition this month after it suspended its chapters of SJP and Jewish Voice for Peace chapters. From ground-level protests to SG’s reinstatement resolution, Comets have been demonstrating their disagreement with UTD’s decision at all levels of organization.

“This was definitely a stab in the back,” Lyan Alshaikhsalama, a child learning and development sophomore, said. “I often felt safe here [at UTD], but now it feels even more prominent that UTD does not care for its Palestinian students ... There wasn’t a removal of the rocks for any other movement ... Yet you remove the rocks whenever Palestinians voice our opinions on the rocks?”

While PSC’s Week of Action had many Muslim and Arab attendees, participants at each event came from all backgrounds.

“I’m a Jewish student here and I walk past the rocks every day, and I’ve even spray painted stars of David on the rocks,” ATEC freshman Oliver Hood said. “No matter what side you’re on, the removal of the rocks is a removal of free speech on campus.”



SHREYA RAVI | MERCURY STAFF

ROCKS
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

“Even though I was the one painting the majority of Israeli messages, it’s ridiculous,” Lizardi said.

On Nov. 21, a group of students painted several small stones with the Palestinian and transgender flags’ colors and scattered them where the Spirit Rocks used to stand. Audrey Neal, an ATEC junior, said there was a tradition of painting the rocks for Transgender Day of Remembrance, and that the designs were chosen to send a striking but minimally disruptive message. Palestinian flag colors were included because students felt UTD opposed pro-Palestine viewpoints. Groundskeepers removed these rocks and washed away the “CENSORED” message Belford and Spadaro



SHREYA RAVI | MERCURY STAFF



SG
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

does disproportionately impact these students who were using that to make their voices heard,” Edupuganti said.

30 minutes of speeches, amendment proposals and votes preceded the resolution’s final ratification. One proposed and accepted amendment called for the resolution to be shared with the Richardson city council and other state and local representatives. Another proposal, introduced by senator and computer science senior Christopher Zhou, was to delete S.R. 2023-08’s 14th paragraph and replace it with a sentence acknowledging harm done by racist statements toward Muslim, Arab and Jewish students. The paragraph previously only mentioned Muslim and Arab students

had drawn on the pavement the next day.

“To wake up to the news [the rocks] had been removed was distasteful, to say the least,” Neal said.

At the Nov. 28 meeting of SG, resolution S.R. 2023-08 was passed, calling for the Spirit Rocks’ restoration and requesting that UTD communicate with student leadership before making major decisions on student expression. In addition, Edupuganti suggested a sticker wall as a new venue for student speech.

The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, which challenges First Amendment violations on college campuses, said the rocks’s removal may be unconstitutional. Graham Piro, a program officer with FIRE, said this depends on what type of speech was originally allowed on the Spirit Rocks. Without further clarification from admin, this standard

is unclear, given UTD has tolerated a variety of political messaging on the rocks since their establishment.

“If [UTD] is closing the forum because it now disapproves of specific political expression, that could be viewpoint discrimination, a potential violation of a state university’s First Amendment obligations,” Piro said.

Piro said that several other campuses have removed walls, rocks, and other landmarks used for student speech in recent years. Additionally, other universities’ administrations have censored student speech pertaining to Israel and Palestine, for example, by dissolving SJP chapters.

“In all these instances, we urge universities to be mindful of their obligations to uphold student expressive rights,” Piro said.



JACK SIERPUTOWSKI | MANAGING EDITOR

and discussed UTD administration’s role in this harm. The amendment was not passed.

“A lack of administrative justice initiatives for Jewish students is inaccurate,” senator and math junior Willow Teaney said when challenging the proposition. “The university sending President Benson on a media tour through Israel and removing the Spirit Rocks does speak to the university not disrespecting Jewish students the way Arab and Muslim students have been.”

Edupuganti said administrators such as Fitch, Winkle, Director of Internal Communications Phil Roth and Director of Student Development Tineil Lewis-Moore are commonly seen at SG meetings. All administrators left the room before S.R. 2023-08 was unanimously ratified.

Some public commenters mentioned a

sticker wall that SG has been working on implementing, but Edupuganti said it is not a replacement for the Spirit Rocks.

“[The sticker wall] came about because of the sticker pole that once existed outside of Hoblitzelle Hall,” Edupuganti said. “They’re two different forms of expression.”

While Student Government passing a resolution cannot reverse UTD’s decision, it demonstrates students’ will for the administration to consider.

“To suddenly change course [after] years of inaction is taking a clear stance on what kind of political speech has been arbitrarily decided as unacceptable,” a third student said during public comment. “Allegations of hypocrisy [are only] meaningful if administration has actual principles and a conscience.”

UTD and JFK: a 60 year history

The former president was assassinated before his planned visit with UTD founders

ANDRÉ AVERION
Mercury Staff

Paying tribute to the 60th anniversary of John F. Kennedy’s assassination, the McDermott Library provided a public collection of books, government reports, feature films, and documentaries.

On the same day that hundreds gathered in Dealey Plaza for the anniversary of Nov. 22, 1963, the McDermott library put out 32 items from within the library on public display to commemorate Kennedy’s life and presidency. The collection includes two letters provided to JFK, suggesting an interaction with the Graduate Research Center of the Southwest - which would later be known as UTD. Five librarians collaborated to create the collection, including head of information literacy services Loreen Henry, senior librarian Matt Makowka, senior librarian Alexander Rodriguez, research services librarian Larén Anderson, digital archivist Molly Tepera and instruction librarian Sarah Dornback.

“[The items] represent a broad range of the

assassination, the conspiracies, the presidency of JFK, his wife and his family,” Henry said.

The chosen selection on display represents a fraction of a vast collection, which includes JFK’s flight records at the Aviation Museum and several documented artifacts and letters found in the Special Collection & Archives. It makes for one of the most comprehensive collections of JFK’s death, which when put together, tell the greater story of JFK’s address to UTD.

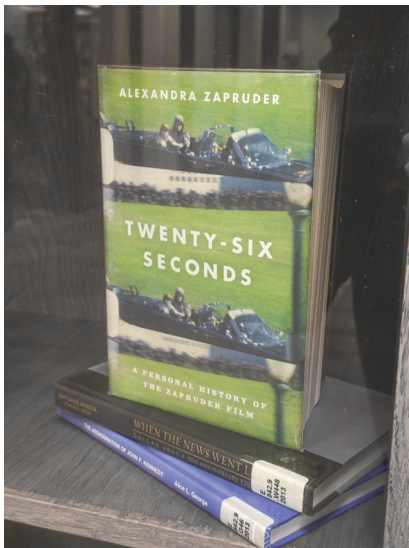
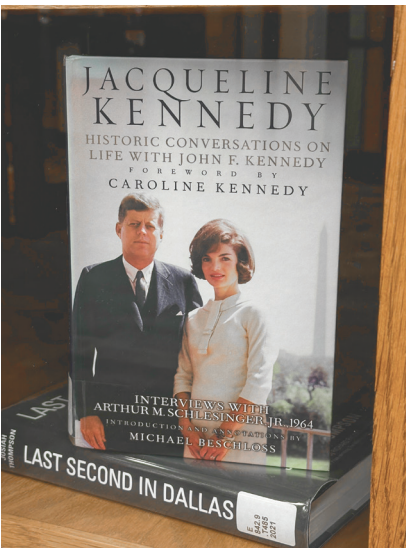
JFK considered visiting UTD, but his advance man Gerry Bruno claimed it was too far away from Dallas to be practical on Oct. 31, 1963. Even so, local political leaders and campus public relations tried to bring JFK to UTD due to its aerospace research, which would eventually play a role in the space race. A helicopter escort was reportedly considered to make up for the distance. In the end, Texas Governor John Connally convinced JFK to visit the Dallas Trade Mart Nov. 22 for political and theatrical appeal.

Following this change, founders Erik Jons-

son and Lloyd Berkner and sent a letter Nov. 20 to become lead sponsors at the Dallas Trade Mart, inviting JFK and his party for a luncheon at noon alongside members of the Dallas Assembly and Dallas Citizens Council.

“It was really important at that time in the 60’s and 70’s for the United States to become part of the emergence of space and technology. Of course, the founders of UT Dallas fully embraced that when creating the Southwest campus,” Henry said. “They recognized that it was very important for the United States to be competitive on the world stage, and we know JFK embraced that. He [even] knew Jonsoson and Green.”

So while JFK’s final itinerary never included campus, its representatives would still have met with JFK had he not been assassinated, granted, JFK was already 30 minutes late as he decided to take a more scenic view of Dallas, rather than the direct routes Conally and other city leaders had recommended. Ultimately it landed him in



PHOTOS: JASON SADHANANDH | MERCURY STAFF

the crosshairs of Lee Harvey Oswald, who at 12:30 a.m. fired the first shot that killed JFK.

At the luncheon event, over 2,500 were in attendance when Jonsoson made the announcement JFK had been injured. Within the next few minutes, Jonsoson corrected himself and ended the event. Within the next few days of the luncheon, Berkner provided distributed copies of JFK’s original speech to the scientists and faculty as obtained by the Associated Press, alongside his own personal note addressing the campus.

“We are all stricken with grief by the events of the day of tragedy, November 22, 1963. That the President was here as the personal guest of our institution can only deepen our sense of mourning,” Berkner said. “His first words were to have been about the Center and its place in the development of the social fabric of our nation.”

While the tribute collection presented this year does not host those speeches, it does records and a newspaper from the era of the assassination. Several documentaries and even the video recording JFK’s assassi-

What's that on top of this truck?

Pictured here is a parking vehicle equipped with an automatic license plate reader, or ALPR.

According to Elena Grant, Assistant Director: Parking & Transportation Services, ALPR equipment was acquired by UTD in 2019 and rolled out in 2020. The department only owns one mobile unit, mounted on a car.

ALPRs are primarily used to check

cars for permits but can also identify lost or stolen vehicles and notify law enforcement when a car involved in an Amber alert is spotted. While ALPRs can quickly check multiple vehicles’ license plates, all citations must be checked by an enforcement officer to ensure they are correct.



ROBERT TANTIADO | MERCURY STAFF

A Midsummer’s Night’s drag transforms campus with fantasy, charity, and unforgettable performances



PHOTOS BY ASHWIN SANGAREDDYPETA | MERCURY STAFF

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY HILARY NGUYEN | MERCURY STAFF

PAOLA MARTINEZ
Mercury Staff

Chi Alpha Iota transformed the SSA stage into a fantasy wonderland through the Shakespearean theme of “A Midsummer’s Night’s Drag” on Nov. 4 and Nov. 11. In the fifth annual installment of XAI’s drag show, performers made full use of the stage, dancing and weaving through the aisles.

Comets danced and lip-synched to songs like “Ignorance” by Paramore, “Confident” by Demi Lovato, “Bad” by Michael Jackson, “Criminal” by Taemin and “I’m Just Ken” by Ryan Gosling. The show also included guest performances by Novis Acapella and 200PERCENT.

Tips collected during the performance were donated to charity, with 25% of proceeds given to House of Rebirth and another 25% given to the Palestine Children’s Relief Fund.

Alison Spadaro, a math senior and president of XAI, said “A Midsummer’s Night’s Drag” was initially chosen to follow a fairycore theme, a fantasy aesthetic based on fairy and elf mythology. The Shakespearean theme

split the performances into two acts to show the drag personas’ journeys through the fairy world in search of their identities.

“[The theme] gave our performers a space to express their characters that they’ve developed,” Spadaro said. “This idea was to put together as a loose plot to tie in a space for their personalities to shine through.”

Mechanical engineering senior Natasha Rahman’s drag persona was “Delta,” with inspiration taken from 1900s LGBTQ+ history. She said that XAI’s annual fall drag shows follow ballroom culture in creating a safe space for self-expression. “Delta” stays true to Rahman’s Pakistani culture while also allowing her to explore her masculinity through the means of a “stereotypical brown boy.”

“My name, ‘Delta,’ comes from the Greek symbol for change,” Rahman said. “It is an homage to being the change between what my culture is and being a queer individual. We can now have culture and sexuality play a role together rather than in separate playing fields.”

Katie Richard, an ATEC senior with drag persona “Willow,” said the annual drag shows enhance LGBTQ+ culture on campus by establishing traditions and remembering the history of the queer community. Neuroscience senior Tiel Livsey said their drag persona “Endomorphis”—an alien cosmic bug—shows that despite a lack of understanding from others, self-expression can work through bold and unique methods.

According to Livsey, “Endomorphis” is a symbol of glamrock, self-acceptance, and the boundless potential of exploration.

“Since Endo is ... from outer space, there is this sense of outsidership, but other people in that outsidership can join in too,” Livsey said.

The drag shows hosted by XAI enable the queer community to hold their ground despite recently passed Texas bills that have made LGBTQ+ self-expression difficult. One of the charities XAI supports through donations is House of Rebirth, a Dallas nonprofit that helps Black trans women with housing and other resources to ensure their safety and well-being.

“[The show] ends up spreading what drag is because a lot of people will come and say that this was their first drag show,” game design senior Vi Collins said.

Collins’ persona “Noiz” is the one of two characters in the drag show that is a human travelling through the fairy world. Noiz enters the show with an attitude of rage and angst against the world, but by the end of the show they find purpose, friendship and camaraderie.

“Because some people don’t know where drag shows are held or don’t know how to access [them,] that will be their first experience into what drag culture is, or sometimes what the LGBTQ+ community is,” Collins said. “It helps spread the sense of community within and shows off a variety of identities.”

The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes Revives the Franchise with New Faces and Characters

KARLEY BOLENBAUGH
Mercury Staff

The newest addition to the Hunger Games franchise, “The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes,” offers longtime fans and casual viewers the chance to revisit the world of Panem from a new perspective, 64 years before Katniss is reaped.

“The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes” released in theaters on Nov. 16, earning \$46.1 million domestically just on its first weekend. Based on the book of the same title, “The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes” is a prequel to the original Hunger Games trilogy and follows the antagonist of the main series, Coriolanus Snow, through his origins and initial experience with the Hunger Games. For what it is, the movie serves as a faithful adaptation of the novel.

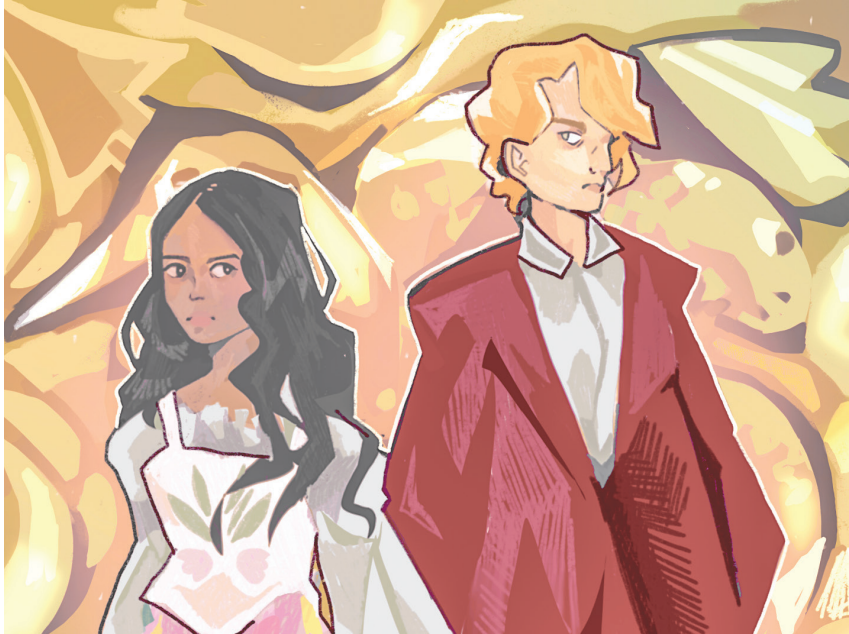
A beautiful 1950s inspired aesthetic combined with references to the main film series make the viewer feel like they are in a past version of Panem. The two-hour runtime doesn’t allow a complete coverage of the source material, but Snow’s journey from impoverished schoolboy to tyrannical president is conveyed smoothly. Though lacking the internal monologue present throughout the novel, Tom Blyth’s excellent performance more than makes up for this, perfectly conveying Snow’s emotions, especially during the emotional climax towards the end.

The star-studded cast of Peter Dinklage, Viola Davis and Hunter Schafer play their roles perfectly; however, Rachel Zegler remains the standout of the movie. Zegler perfectly captures the idea of

Baird, her ever-present performance and mystery. Zegler’s voice is beautiful to the point where I got annoyed whenever her songs were interrupted. One scene I was eager to see adapted from the novel is the scene towards the end of the games, where a cage of snakes is deployed into the arena. A slight change was made to the movie, making this the very end of the games instead, a change made for the better. Zegler’s performance of “The Old Therebefore”, surrounded by a dress of snakes, ends the games with a high that serves as a much more engaging ending than the slow exhaustion race in the novel.

One change that hurt the movie was the exclusion of side characters from the

SEE **HUNGER GAMES**, PAGE 12



YIYI DING | MERCURY STAFF

Escape to Peace Middle East cafe

KARLEY BOLENBAUGH
Mercury Staff

If you’re –tired of the same chain coffee shops, visit Peace Middle East for desserts, pastries, teas and unique coffee from Syria and Turkey. If you’d rather stick to your routine cup of Joe they also have typical cafe drinks to sip on while you bask in the location’s contemporary but comfortable ambiance.

Located seven minutes away from campus, the coffee shop opens at 10 a.m. every morning. Their butter croissants sell out fast, so it’s best to get there early. Pastries are typically less than \$5, with drinks ranging from \$6 to \$10. The café serves a variety of lattes alongside Turkish coffee, which is traditionally brewed to have a foamy top. Rather than the typical English breakfast or earl grey teas served at other cafes, Peace Middle East serves Palestinian, Moroccan, Arabic and Syrian teas, which have a more earthy and herbaaceous flavor profile. You can buy a single serving of the tea or a pot to share with companions. While their drinks are plentiful, save room for their various treats, including muffins, croissants, baklava, cheesecake, ice cream, waffles and toast.

The atmosphere of the place is calming and warm, matching their slogan “the peace your soul deserves,” placed above



KARLEY BOLENBAUGH | MERCURY STAFF

the fountain in the center of the cafe. With the warm light streaming through the window panes, the modern furniture, and the quiet atmosphere, Peace Middle East is the perfect place to study. I spent a good thirty minutes comfortably working there uninterrupted, surrounded by beautiful geometric wall designs. Its proximity to campus and quiet atmosphere makes it the perfect study spot for finals season.

The pastries are on full display upon entering, ranging standard fare from standard fare like cookies and croissants to giant raspberry macarons and baklava, a Middle Eastern dessert made layered

phyllo dough, chopped nuts and delightfully sweet syrup. While pricier than a chain bakery or coffee shop, the vanilla matcha and baklava are well worth it—despite the \$14 price point for both. The baklava was incredibly flaky when I bit into it, coated in a delicious pistachio crumble. The matcha was on the sweeter side, which I don’t mind, but it still was a refreshing way to wash down my sugary treat.

Overall, if you’re looking for a relaxing place to study with tastes from Turkey, Syria and Morocco, Peace Middle East is the perfect cafe for you.

THE FIX
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10

moment you step inside. The shop itself is set on an outer of the block corner, and the large glass walls bring in warm sunlight during the day. At night, the overhead lights and lanterns brighten to illuminate the café from inside, and chatter heightens over steaming pots of tea. On rainy days, you can bask in the cozy vibes while watching droplets stream down the wide windows.

Iced or hot, the classic Harazi coffee with Mafowar cardamom and cream is a refreshing yet spiced drink perfect for any time of year. For tea lovers, the red tea is a must, flavored with cardamom and sweetened to your liking. Additionally, the menu extends beyond individual beverages, providing an opportunity for communal enjoyment with large pots of coffee and tea for groups.

The shop has also become a favorite for its espresso bar, where expertly crafted drinks satisfy even the most discerning coffee drinkers. The Pistachio Latte and Saffron Latte fuse traditional Yemeni flavors with modern coffee trends, each with a distinct flavor profile that tastes authentic rather than syrupy. It is pricier to order away from the traditional menu, with espresso bar drinks ranging from \$4.50 to \$5.50, but the quality justifies the price. For those seeking dairy-free options, alternative creamers are avail-



RAYA JISHI | MERCURY STAFF

able for an extra \$1 charge.

Haraz offers a variety of pastries and desserts as well—my favorite was the smooth mosaic cake, consisting of biscuit pieces set in velvety chocolate slices. The \$7 mosaic cake is available in flavors including plain chocolate, raspberry, and pistachio. I also enjoyed the Bee Bites slice, bread filled with cream cheese and made sweet with your choice of honey or syrup drizzle. Priced at \$6, it is well-portioned and filling.

Overall, Haraz is a standout shop that offers a unique twist on the classic DFW coffee experience. With its commitment to authenticity, welcoming ambiance, and its coffee paired with a delightful array of pastries and desserts, it ensures that every visit is a sensory delight. With its long hours and cozy atmosphere, it’s a must-try for anyone in the DFW area.



Adam Melchor, the opening act for Laufey, plays his guitar while he sings indie pop melodies to the Dallas crowd.

LAUFHEY CONCERT
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10

a pleated miniskirt and a vest given to her by a fan earlier that day. Judging from the aesthetic of the audience, her fans are deeply inspired by her fashion as many wore Victorian child type blouses, mini-skirts were plentiful and coquette ribbons and bows were plastered on tights, hair and about anything else imaginable.

The ambiance that Laufey set as she floated on stage was similar to the vibes of a symphony event. Excitement is bubbling in the air, but the grace the artist exudes caused the audience to have a certain politeness that is rare at concerts. That’s not to say the crowd didn’t sing along to every song, throwing words of admiration at Laufey, but it was refreshing to see a gentle crowd who didn’t overpower the artist. The first song on her setlist, “Fragile” expresses the vibe she exudes perfectly. The sensitive song writing that hammers away at every listen-

ers’ inner hopeless romantic combined with her gentle guitar playing resulted in a wonderful stillness.

Continuing on with a fan favorite, “Valentine”, she sings about the hesitance of stability which most Gen Z listeners can heavily relate to with their baggage of commitment issues. Her melodic voice rings as she sings, “What if he’s the last one I kiss/ What if he’s the only one I’ll ever miss?/ Maybe I should run, I’m only 21/ I don’t even know who I want to become.” She is the voice for this generation of uncertain young adults, and her relatability combined with her poetic descriptions of love make this era of dating seem less dire.

While many of her songs have a gentler vibe with a slow tempo, she picked up the pace with “Dreamer,” a jazzy song that expresses that despite a dreary dating scene, Laufey will not compromise her romantic outlook on life. As she wears a dreamy cowboy hat slathered with delicate red bows, she sings “Oh, I’m givin’ up/I’m throwing in

the hat/I can’t take another lifeless chat/I’m moving up into a cloud, into my fantasy.” Another song with a faster beat, “Lovesick,” created a memorable atmosphere, describing the uncertainty and exhilaration of a car ride with someone you know you shouldn’t be with. As she sang “When the gold rays fell on your skin and my hair got caught in the wind/The choir sang a melancholic hymn,” the venue erupted in warm honey-eyed lighting, and the audience was transported out of the chilly dark venue and into a scene of a heartfelt romance film.

Laufey constantly brings her listeners on a journey through her own life, while getting them to appreciate the complexities of love. As she closed out her concert, graciously thanking her fans as she found out about her first time Grammy nomination in the Texas, an almost peaceful melancholy coated the room and while fans were saddened to see the queen of modern jazz leave, no one could deny that Laufey provided a “Bewitching” night.

MAGICIAN CLUB
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10

and joined the magic club about a year ago after seeing them perform in the Student Union. These tricks included the magician figuring out which card you chose from a pile or illusionist-type of tricks, like turning cards from red to black.

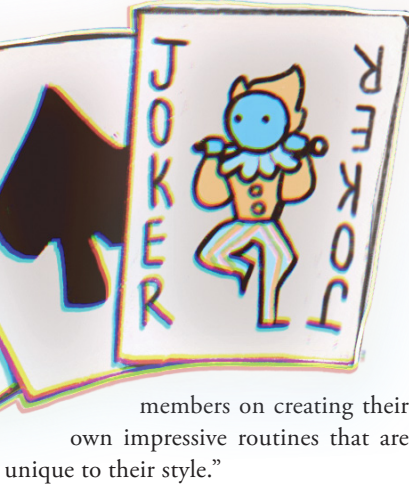
“I’ve always liked magic,” Howe said. “I think I was watching America’s Got Talent just watching people do magic tricks and I was like ‘That’s super cool. I wonder how that works.’ I figured out how some super simple tricks work and then just did [magic tricks] for friends.”

Although a deceiving magic trick can leave a crowd bewildered, it’s not the only thing that is required of a magician. Howe said that showmanship is more than just a magician’s tricks and also requires confidence, knowing your audience and ensuring they are having a good time.

“If people want to pay attention to you and magic is the reason why they’re there, it makes doing [magic] more enjoyable,” Howe said. “Having a good show face, a good show voice, being confident, knowing what you’re going to say ... really makes the experience a lot more enjoyable.”

Kyle Poulson, computer science junior and president of the club, agreed with Howe’s outlook on showmanship and the importance of it when performing magic. Despite the numerous videos online that teach the practical side of magic, Paulson said they rarely ever teach beginners how to actually perform for an audience.

“There’s not as much info about improving theatrics, such as interacting with an audience, and even today there’s still many closely guarded magic secrets,” Poulson said. “Our aim in each of our meetings is to not only show off some pretty cool tricks, but to also guide



members on creating their own impressive routines that are unique to their style.”

Howe always keeps a deck of cards on him in case he wants to perform a trick spontaneously — like he did for us at The Mercury. He fanned out a deck of cards, had us pick one and he had to guess the card we picked. Throughout the entire trick, he kept us engaged through banter and crowd interaction.

“I really make a big deal about making sure that your audience enjoys the trick,” Howe said.

Sudin Rajbanshi, a computer science junior, said they enjoy the presence of a magic club at UTD thanks to the fun and free entertainment for passing students.

“We do tabling, so when people are at lunch, they can just watch magic for free,” Rajbanshi said. “I know there’s a lot of people selling food or advertising, but if they want something fun, they can just pass through.”

The magic club is open to anyone wanting to learn tricks, with meetings in the SSA building on Wednesday nights. Each meeting has a loose lesson plan that trains members in new skills, including sleight of hand or feeling confident while performing for an audience. The club can also be seen performing every Monday at 2 p.m. in the Student Union. The club is available through their Instagram, @magicutdallas, which has a link to their Discord server and YouTube channel.

“People of any skill level are welcome, so it’s mainly a time for learning something new, asking questions, and hanging out,” Poulson said.

THE HUNGER GAMES
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

wnovel, which made the world feel less established. Snow’s interactions with his fellow classmates, peacekeepers, Plinths and the Covey work to shape his view on the society we see. In the novel, the side

characters are three-dimensional, bringing a human aspect to the words put on paper. Most of the Capitol is rich and snobbish, but there are mentors that show empathy. But in the movie, the Covey, who define Lucy Gray’s background, are relegated to background filler. These groups are only briefly touched on with-

out a second thought, with most of the dialogue given to Snow instead, leading to an empty feeling world and a messier picture of Snow’s beliefs.

This wasn’t the only part of the movie that suffered from its short run time. The first two segments of the movie felt very long and disconnected from the final seg-

ment. “The Mentor” and “The Prize” both maintained a fast pace over a long stretch of time, while “Peacekeeper” felt ridiculously slow and short in contrast. The disconnectedness was an ongoing problem from the novel, but the short runtime of Snow’s time as peacekeeper easily made the last third the least developed.

Overall, “The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes” is a beautiful movie that excels at what it can within its time limit. Whether you’re a longtime fan of the franchise like myself or a casual viewer that has never even heard of the Hunger Games, this movie will leave you entertained and wishing for more.

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Remembering Abby Sterling

Softball assistant coach was ‘a bright light within the department’ and brought success and warmth to the team

TYLER BURKHARDT
Mercury Staff

UTD assistant softball coach Abby Sterling was hired in September 2022 and quickly made her mark both on the field and within the department. Tragically, just two weeks before Thanksgiving, Sterling passed away unexpectedly at 27 years old.

A big personality and warm spirit, Sterling quickly made her presence felt within UTD Athletics. In Sterling’s first season, the Comets played to a .571 winning percentage — but her impact extended well beyond the softball field. Joining UTD Athletics at a time of departmental transition, Sterling became a fast friend to the new staff. Athletics Director Angela Marin said her public memorial service in Nederland was attended by about 40 Comets, including most of the softball team and many of the department’s staff.

“Abby just made us all smile,” Marin added. “She made us all laugh, and she was full of life.”

Bill Pettitt, the associate athletic director for External Affairs, said that everyone in the department loved to be around Sterling.

“Abby came along at a time when there was a lot of transition within the department,” Pettitt said. “She’d only been here about a little over a year, but she had a huge impact on the department as far as chemistry, and the team just adored her.”

Dylan Kuester, marketing and social media coordinator for athletics, was one of Sterling’s closest friends on the department’s staff, along with former assistant softball coach Kaylie McHugh. He said he first met Sterling when the department was working on headshots, and from the first meeting, she was warm and friendly.

“She introduced herself to me, all very happy and smiling, and the first thing she said was ‘Dylan, I’ve heard a lot of good things about you. I love the work that you do, you’re your killer with your job, and you do a great job with media,’” Kuester said. “We kind of just became friends after that occurrence.”

On the field, Sterling was a fierce competitor. Marin recalls coming across a picture of the ASC players of the week from March of 2019: it featured Sterling alongside UTD Senior Melissa Livermore as co-hitters of the week. As a player for ASC rival Louisiana College,

Sterling slugged over .600. Marin said that Sterling’s experience, competitive spirit and outgoing personality translated into a love of coaching.

“She was always on the softball field,” Marin said. “She was always making herself a better coach so that she could be better for her student athletes.”

Kuester said that many of his favorite memories of Sterling came from spring 2022’s softball trips. It was during those tournaments, that he could glimpse how strong her bond was with the student athletes on the softball team.

“Her team meant the world to her,” Kuester said. “Really, every time that we talked about something, her team was always brought up — how about how she feels about these athletes, how much she appreciates them. The girls loved her, and she was just a light to her team.”

Marin said that the loss was especially hard on the student athletes, and that the student counselling center played a large role in helping both students and staff process Sterling’s passing.

“The office is quieter without her here,” Marin said. “We feel her absence. We’re such in close quarters, here in athletics, that we see each other every day, which means that it’s just that much



UTD ATHLETICS | COURTESY

[more] personal when we lose one of our own.”

The Thanksgiving season provided an opportunity for Athletics to remember the softball coach and celebrate what she brought to the department. Pettitt said that he had promised Sterling, an East-Texan, that he would make gumbo for the department’s Thanksgiving potluck.

“When she passed, I went ahead and made her gumbo — with potato salad, which she said was the East Texas way — and we had it on Tuesday [at the department’s Thanksgiving potluck] as a small tribute to her.”

While her presence on the field will be missed, Sterling’s memory will remain in the hearts of her athletes and the department. Marin said that the department is dedicating the upcoming season to Sterling, and there are other initiatives in the works to honor her memory.



PHOTOS: UTD ATHLETICS | COURTESY
Senior baseball players Ryan Vera (left) and Dylan Hughley (right).

Senior spotlight: Comet baseball

Pitchers reflect on UTD careers, upcoming season

TYLER BURKHARDT
Mercury Staff

At first glance, there is little similarity between Dylan Hughley and Ryan Vera: one studies computer science, the other business administration, and even on the baseball diamond, Hughley is right-handed while Vera throws with his left. But both have a gift that unites them — their talent for throwing the baseball.

The duo will lead UTD’s starting rotation for the 2024 baseball season. After graduation, Hughley, a business

admin senior, plans to work in the insurance field. Vera, a computer science graduate student, is uncertain if he wants to pursue cybersecurity or machine learning. But both are clear on one thing: in their last season in the American Southwest Conference, they intend to compete for the championship.

“We are a championship team,” Hughley said. “There’s no doubt in my

SEE BASEBALL, PAGE 14

Women's basketball kicks off final season as DIII school

SAROSH ISMAIL
Mercury Staff

After winning the American Southwest Conference last spring, the women’s basketball team has entered their last season as a Division III school with a 71-43 win against Austin on Nov. 15.

UTD will transition to a Division II school in spring, making this the last season the Comets will compete for an ASC championship. The first season after the transition will be a probationary period in which the team will be unable to compete in tournaments and championships. Last year, the Comets won their fifth ASC title in Feb. 2022 and qualified for the NCAA championship tournament, although they lost in the first round. Now, with motivation to be better than last season and the pressure of making championships, sophomore guard Amanda Crowninshield said the Comets have a stronger ambition to win.

“I think that has added a little bit of fuel to the fire,” Crowninshield said. “This might be the last time that most of us on the team get to go to the tournament. That is a little bit of added pressure, but I think we’re ready to go.”

Head coach Joseph Shotland is in his second year of coaching the women’s team and, he expects the team to do even better. While the team was still



SHREYA RAVI | MERCURY STAFF
Jordyn Hofmann blocks a shot on Nov. 15 against the Austin College Kangaroos.

adjusting to a more aggressive defensive play style last season, they have adapted and now feel more at ease with Shotland and know what to expect out of practice.

“Every year, you are trying to refine the things and stay sharp at your craft,” Shotland said. “Whether that is new drills or new offenses or defenses, we are constantly trying to re-evaluate and be the best version of ourselves. We are going to compete hard and leave it on the floor. And that is what is exciting.”

Compared to the start of last season, the Comets’ average points per game have increased and they are currently undefeated. The team also passed their game high from the 2020-2021 season from 88 to 89 points. Now, Crowninshield said that they have found their identity as a defensive team.

“I think throughout [last] season we kind of found that we are a defensive, aggressive team and being go, go, go all the time,” Crowninshield said. “It became integrated into our whole culture,

SEE BASKETBALL, PAGE 14

Athletics revamps look in preparation for Division II

KARLEY BOLENBAUGH
Mercury Staff

UTD's new Division II status isn't the only recent change being made within the Athletic Department — a fresh new logo is now available on Comet gear for athletes and fans alike.

The new Comets logo stays true to the spirit of the past logo, incorporating the name of our sports teams and mascot. Whether in black, white, orange, green or a combination, the logo provides a sleek and modern look that reflects a new era for student athletes. UTD has officially been the Comets since 1981, but according to Director of Athletics Angela Marin, designing a Comet was the biggest challenge when coming up with the new logo.

"We went through a thousand iterations of what a

comet looks like," Marin said. "You know, it's hard to get right, but I think our team really got it right."

Previous installments of the logo have created confusion regarding the letter C in "comet." To combat this, the Communications Department hired a third party to create a new design. The UTD Athletics department tweaked it to make it authentically UTD. With plans for a new track and field complex and upcoming DII status, UTD athletics is looking to grow its brand and show that growth in the visual change.

"It shows the comet in motion on our logo. It shows movement and that represents what we're doing," Marin said. "We are growing, we're moving forward. We are advancing, and I think that really represents what the comet is about. So, I was really, really happy with that and the boldness of it. It just represents strength, and

you know, we're here."

UTD has won a total of 44 DIII conference championships since the creation of the Athletics Department and 34 in the past 10 years. Newly registered as a DII school, UTD will attend the Lone Star Conference, the premier DII conference.

"That's why we're doing all these upgrades and build-ings," Marin said. "Building so that we can recruit and attract the right students that will be successful at UTD, that will be successful in our athletic department and continue the tradition of succeeding and winning that we have currently."

Alongside previously released shirts and sweaters, UTD athletics now sells Championship gear to commemorate Comet athletes. According to Marin, the Athletics Department is eager for feedback from stu-



UTD ATHLETICS | COURTESY
The department's new logo, with a comet emphasizing growth and moving forward.

dents on how they can improve their facilities. Her contact information can be found on the UTD Athletics website.

"We look to revamp and build new facilities and upgrade what we have," Marin said. "It's just a great time to be a Comet."



UTD SPORTS SCHEDULE

AWAYHOME

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL

DEC 16 at McMurry 1PM
DEC 18 at #6/9 Hardin-Simmons 1PM
DEC 28 at Schreiner 3PM
JAN 4 at Concordia (TX) 6:30PM
JAN 6 at RV Mary Hardin-Baylor 1PM
JAN 11 vs East Texas Baptist 5:30PM
JAN 13 vs LeTourneau 1PM
JAN 18 vs Sul Ross State 5:30PM
JAN 20 vs Howard Payne 1PM
JAN 24 at Ozarks 5PM
JAN 27 vs Ozarks 1PM



SHREYA RAVIL | MERCURY STAFF

MEN'S BASKETBALL

DEC 16 at McMurry 3PM
DEC 18 at Hardin-Simmons 3PM
DEC 29 at Cal Lutheran 4PM
DEC 30 #23 Tufts 4PM
JAN 4 at Concordia (TX) 7:30PM
JAN 6 at RV Mary Hardin-Baylor 3PM
JAN 11 vs East Texas Baptist 7:30PM
JAN 13 vs LeTourneau 3PM
JAN 18 vs Sul Ross State 7:30PM
JAN 20 vs Howard Payne 3PM
JAN 24 at Ozarks 7PM
JAN 27 vs Ozarks 3PM



ARUSHI SHARMA | MERCURY STAFF

BASKETBALL
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

in our practices and in the way that we interact with each other. We're always focusing on going 110% and never letting up a play."

This season, the Comets have dedicated their practices to focusing on defense and not letting up a play.

"I felt as if the bar was already pretty high," freshman guard Molly

Ly said. "First thing in the morning, everyone gets there, we get our shoes on, and we get down to business. In practices, things can get pretty [aggressive] because of how competitive we are, but everyone just wants to win."

Practices are held at 7 a.m., and the girls get 3 straight hours to practice every day. This is a shorter time than the average five hours most DIII schools practice, so Shotland

keeps practices short and packed and tries to recreate the intensity of games, making sure their time is used efficiently.

"We've got a bunch of kids that want to win, and I think there's a certain intensity level that you have to reach in order to win," Shotland said. "One thing that I'm very excited about with this group is that we have 14 kids that have that winner's intensity. So, it's been fun to

work with that in the early season and I'm looking forward to growing that muscle and continuing to get better."

The Comets will play 17 more games before the ASC championship tournament on Feb. 22; dates can be found on the UTD Athletics website. All games are free for UTD students and Shotland encourages all students to come and support the Comets in their final run through

DIII. Students can attend all home games for free, which will take place throughout January and February.

"I am very excited for where we are going to go this year, and I'm really hoping to win that crown again," Crowninshield said. "We won last year and are ready to win back-to-back. That usually doesn't happen in our conference, so we are ready to be the first ones in a long time to do that."



BASEBALL
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

mind about that. The expectation is to go win a national championship ... our expectation is to compete for the championship of the NCAA for DIII. And I think the older guys this year are ready to take on that challenge and convey to the younger guys, 'hey, we're not here to mess around. We're here to go win a championship.'"

Ryan Vera was on the Comet baseball team during its back-to-back ASC championship runs in 2021 and 2022. He said that participating in the playoffs was the highlight of his baseball career at UTD.

"Once you get that deep in the playoffs, and you have a chance to win it all, everything becomes much more exciting," Vera said. "On the mound, you're more creative, you're much more into every little detail of the game. It's just fun to go out there and compete hard and know that you have a really good shot of winning."

Hugley, who transferred to UTD in 2022, also had a chance to play with many of the fixtures of those winning teams in 2021 and 2022. Carter Cochran, Orion Drymond and Ramon Garza are all players Hugley cites as influential in helping him learn how to be a part of UTD's "championship culture" — lessons he now hopes to pass onto the next generation of UTD baseball.

"We've been trying to pass that down by making connections with the younger guys and making them feel like they're a part of the family," Hugley said. "Especially with these transfers that we've got from schools within our conference -- they've known us for a couple of years, and they've played against us. And obviously, they wanted to join a championship culture, which is

what I believe we have here at UTD."

And, in addition to setting an example for the team in 2024, Hugley and Vera hope to make their impact felt on the field. Each pitches with a unique style, refined over their years of college baseball. Vera said Hugley is a pitcher who thrives on attacking the hitter, an approach that leads to consistent success.

"He's a guy who embodies the mentality of throwing strikes, getting ahead of hitters and not being afraid," Vera said. "It's easy to say 'don't be afraid,' but he is someone who really is not scared to throw any pitch in any location in any count...he could throw his weakest pitch to [a batter's] strongest spot and do it with all of the confidence in the world."

Perhaps some of that confidence comes from Hugley's piercing experience. Hugley attributes much of his success to the baseball program at TCS post-grad academy, where the 6'0 righty spent two years — one immediately after high school, and another to rehab from surgery after tearing his UCL. Hugley said the program, which helps prospective recruits play a full year of college-intensity baseball without losing their NCAA eligibility, revived his ability to play baseball.

"I don't think I'd play anywhere at this level — DIII, DII, or JUCO — if I didn't go to TCS first."

Vera's big-league pitching comparison, according to his teammates, is Joe Ryan, the Minnesota Twins RHP who broke out in 2022. When asked to sum up what distinguishes the 5'10" lefty on the mound, Hugley was concise.

"Vera's a dawg. That guy works harder than anyone on the team, and then he goes out there and just gets the job done."

The southpaw often works on thinking more like a hitter than a pitcher, something Vera said that he picked up from practicing with former teammate Garza. During practice, he may ask a teammate who worked a walk or made hard contact during an at-bat against him what they were seeing at the plate, or talk to the hitters about what counts they are looking for a specific pitches in. After collecting input from his teammates, the ASC Distinguished Scholar-Athlete will incorporate that feedback into his pitching strategy to stay one step ahead of the opposing batters in his next outing.

Together, Hugley and Vera will headline an extremely talented team of Comets poised to capture its fourth — and final — ASC championship in 2024. Head baseball coach Shane Shewmake said that this year's team is as deep a roster as UTD has ever fielded. Combine that with the team's championship aspirations, and when the baseball season begins at home against Texas Lutheran on Feb. 16, it will kick off a semester of excitement. Many of the games will begin with either Hugley or Vera on the mound, and they would love the support of Comets in the stands along the way.

"It would be awesome to have students to come out for the games," said Vera. "Most of the time it's just friends and family, but when we hosted the conference tournament in 2021, the stands were packed. That was really exciting, fun to play, and I'd love to see that in my last season here."



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Don't confuse holiday consumerism with a 'giving spirit'

Unnecessary spending defines American winter festivities; the next generation should break the cycle

UNAIZA KHAKOOO
Mercury Staff

With the holiday season officially underway, sales from every store imaginable have begun to roll out without the slightest hint of stopping, turning a time meant for charity into a season of unnecessary spending. Whether it be minimizing your purchases this sale season or donating to charities with the money you would have spent, students can take steps towards wise spending and avoiding unnecessary waste — and finally have that fulfilling holiday we long for.

Far beyond physical advertisements, the internet these days feels like a breeding ground for promotions and sales. Sometimes I feel so bombarded by it all that I genuinely start to question: should I be buying more? Do I need to buy a chamoy pickle kit? What harm could a new hair styling tool do? The most recent example of this culture of blatant consumerism is TikTok's November launch of its shopping feature. For the past few weeks, I've seen my For You Page transform from a conglomeration of silly little videos curated for me to an overwhelming ad campaign for suspiciously cheap versions of popular products such as makeup products and hair styling tools. It feels like I can't scroll more than five videos without encountering an influencer pushing me to buy from TikTok Shop, and the For You Pages of my peers all across the country must look terrifyingly similar.

With social media playing a crucial part in holiday sales this year, it is no wonder that consumers aged 17 to 25 are predicted to spend 15% more than they did in 2022. Part of this increase may be that Gen Z is growing up and that people have more disposable income now the pandemic has ended. What used to be a week of sales has turned into a month-long event; early Black Friday deals come weeks before the actual Friday, and according to a survey by Shopify, in 2023, 41% of shoppers said they planned on beginning their spending at the end of October.

As someone who does not celebrate holidays during the winter months, these trends make it seem like the joy of Christmas has become about the joy of shopping. Growing up Muslim, my standout memories of holiday celebrations included volunteering and charitable giving for Eid. As I began to interact with Christmas through holiday parties at school and gift exchanges for clubs, I was told Christmas held a similar sense of giving. However, as I get older, it feels like companies exploit the value of giving for the purpose of increasing sales.

From the outside looking in, Christmas seems corrupted by the American need to buy and consume. The original charitable giving and familial celebration aspect of the holiday has been put on a backburner;



ERIN GUTSCHKE | MERCURY STAFF

whether it be purchasing lavish gifts for friends and family or just updating tree decorations, shopping seems just as much of a Christmas tradition as Santa Claus coming down the stairs.

I've found myself falling prey to the big bold letters advertising 50% off, ending up with junk I did not need. If 66% of shoppers plan to participate in Black Friday sales like me, that could end in a lot of potentially wasted dollars. When you are constantly bombarded by new deals wherever you look, it seems almost nonsensical to opt out — almost as if you would be losing money by not buying the items on sale. The culture of constantly having to buy more as a result of social media and holiday marketing has created what

feels like a societal pressure to spend while the iron is still hot on discount season.

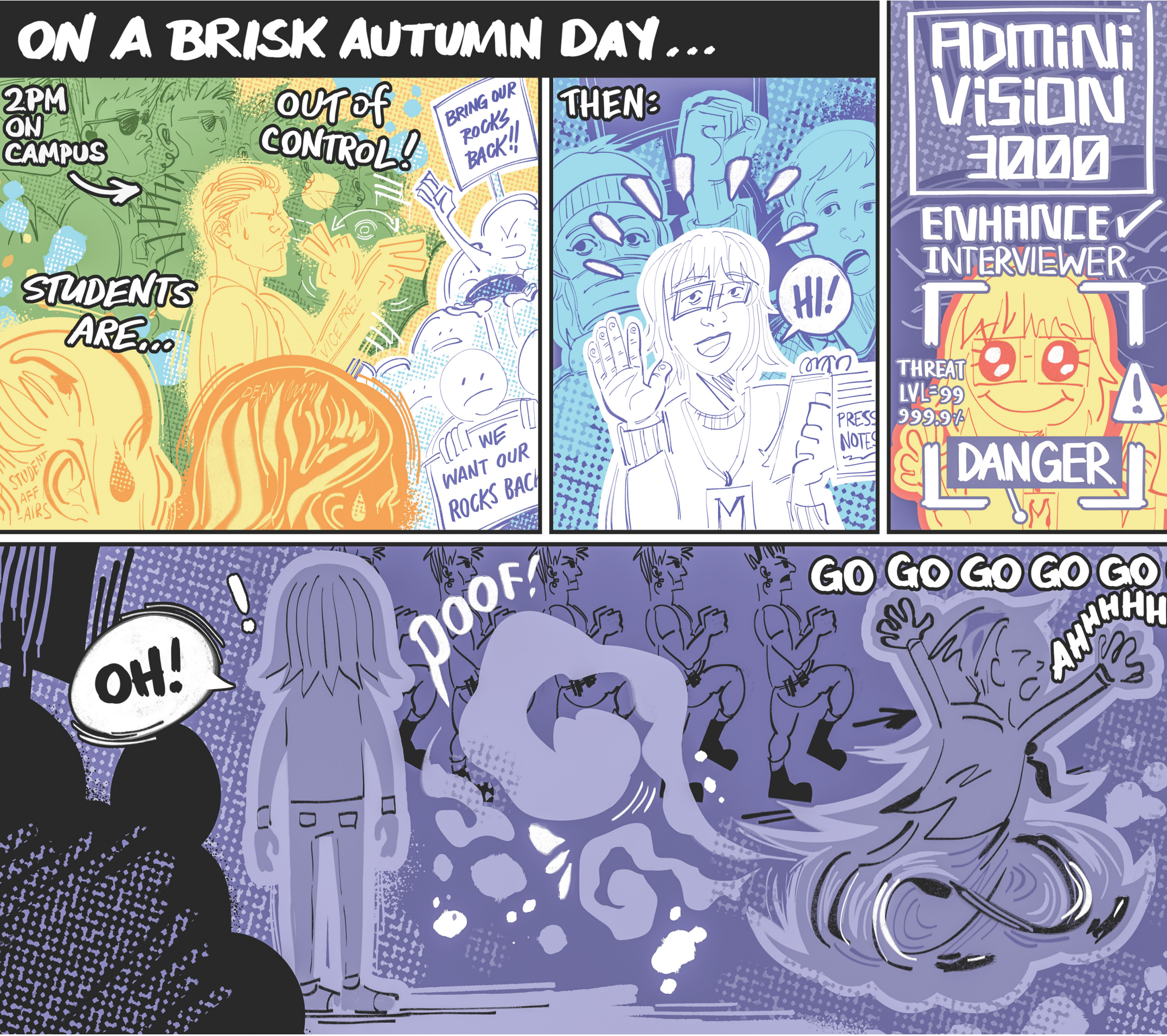
This culture of unnecessary shopping has caused me and many of my peers to fall into a hole of buying and regretting over and over again; my fear of missing out enables me when I see a good deal everyone around me is purchasing. Materialism has found its way into trends with online hauls of massive purchases getting millions of views. Focusing so much on my wants and desires to purchase sometimes blinds me from the economic inequalities around me. I feel myself slowly losing the lessons of generosity I learned growing up.

UTD is an incredibly diverse campus, meaning there are other students who celebrate holidays such

as Diwali and Ramadan that also encourage the nature of giving that I feel the desire to return to. They contrast with ideas of consumerism that have developed around the American holiday season and, therefore, can inspire us to change the narrative and encourage a generational return to the holidays' original spirit.

From the North Texas Food Bank to The Salvation Army of North Texas, there are plenty of organizations with opportunities to volunteer and give back during the holidays. Cutting into just one hour of holiday shopping time to volunteer can make a difference, especially if you do it alongside others. Starting small can help reignite the magic of Christmas.

EDITORIAL CARTOON



ANIKA SULTANA | MERCURY STAFF

Editorial

BRING OUR ROCKS BACK!!

ANIKA SULTANA | MERCURY STAFF

“Censorship.” “Cowardly.” “Bring our rocks back.”

These were the sentiments expressed by students the morning of Nov. 20, when UTD administration removed the Spirit Rocks from campus.

Admin claimed the rocks were never intended for “extended political discourse,” like the month long back-and-forth between pro-Israel and pro-Palestine groups before their removal. But this argument is a smokescreen and a lie. UTD fears students expressing themselves, and the removal of the rocks sets a dangerous precedent for free expression on campus. At best, admin’s decision to remove the Spirit Rocks is damaging to campus culture and university integrity. At worst, it is an unconstitutional violation of students’ free speech.

UTD admin: if you intend to build back trust with the student body, correct your actions and bring back the rocks immediately.

With the tense climate surrounding the conflict between Israel and Palestine, admin is clearly nervous about students expressing their political views in a public forum. But UTD must remember it is beholden to the student body. If students use the rocks to express unpopular views or stand in solidarity with Palestine or Israel, then the university must protect that speech, not suppress it.

In its Nov. 20 statement, Student Affairs justified the removal by arguing the rocks “negatively [impacted] people on and off campus,” blatantly misrepresenting Com-

ets’ feelings and denying their right to self-expression. The vast majority of students — 92% according to The Mercury’s latest poll — disagree with the decision. And even if some rock paintings might have caused discomfort, UTD’s own free speech policy says that to make a political argument is not punishable, “even if some listeners are offended.”

“The freedom of speech, expression, and assembly are fundamental rights and central to the mission of the university,” the policy states, in accordance with state and federal law. UTD does not see that removing a treasured venue of student expression is directly contrary to this position.

The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression has condemned the Spirit Rocks’ removal as damaging to campus culture at best and unconstitutional at worst. Removing the rocks for platforming “extended political discourse” about Israel and Palestine could qualify as viewpoint discrimination, where the university attempts to silence lawful discussion on a particular topic. Even though this discourse was civil, UTD found it unacceptable, and despite *The Mercury’s* multiple attempts to contact members of admin, we continuously received either a lack of comment or responses that failed to point out which policy violation caused the removal of the Spirit Rocks.

Student Affairs claimed that Comets have multiple other avenues to express themselves on campus, but upon closer inspection,

none are as free. Flyers, protests and bulletin boards all require approval or are subject to removal and regulation from admin. The Spirit Rocks did not require students to wade through layers of bureaucracy; anyone with an idea and some paint could make themselves heard on a landmark beloved by all.

College campuses have always been centers of activism in the U.S. In 2023, we celebrate groups like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which played a vital role in ending segregation and advancing the civil rights movement. But in the 60s, university administrators branded SNCC as “agitators” instead of activists. Just like the silencers of the past, who claimed to defend against unrest and harm, UTD muzzles young people by branding their opinions too disruptive the moment they become inconvenient.

The removal of the rocks is even more egregious considering UTD prides itself on its diverse student body, with a history of platforming organizations and events across the political spectrum. It has allowed hot-button topics on the Spirit Rocks and platformed controversial groups like Turning Point USA, and yet it seems to draw the line following a progressive outpouring of support for human rights in Palestine.

While researching for its Oct. 16 story about the rocks, The Mercury was told by Dean of Students Amanda Smith that admin does not police the content painted on

the rocks unless the law or Student Code of Conduct is violated. And in President Richard Benson’s Oct. 16 letter, he explicitly praised student groups peacefully expressing themselves and raising charity money for civilians in the Middle East. And yet, admin has uprooted the Spirit Rocks for being too political just a month after commending their use for free expression. This suggests UTD, in fact, wants to selectively silence a sensitive political issue by leaving students with no means to express themselves.

What’s more, the removal of the rocks bypassed typical procedures: Admin gave no warnings to students regarding impermissible content on the rocks, and the usual group which oversees decisions surrounding the Spirit Rocks, HOP, was not consulted. Nor was Student Government alerted to the decision until the Nov. 20 mass email from Student Affairs. Removing the rocks in complete secrecy can only suggest UTD has something to hide. Admin must make further decisions about student expression openly, with full transparency and input from SG and the HOP committee.

Removing the Spirit Rocks removes a 15-year tradition of self-expression, creativity and passion. It destroys a bastion of school culture in a community that famously feels like it has none. The Spirit Rocks were the heart of our campus’ artistic spirit and free speech. They even had their own beloved Instagram account, @utdrockwars, and the outpouring of love for the rocks and rage

at their uprooting sends a clear message to admin.

“Suppression.” “Infuriating.” “Disappointed.” Students have sent dozens of emails to SG leadership, left hundreds of comments on UTD’s social media, given interviews with local news branches about their disapproval and much more. On Nov. 20, dozens of tiny rocks were painted in the trans and Palestinian flag colors and scattered where the Spirit Rocks used to be. Chalk art of the word “CENSORSHIP” decorated pavement near the Activity Center. On Nov. 29, students covered the Plinth with chalk to express their now-suppressed beliefs. And throughout the week of Nov. 27, students staged daily demonstrations in response to the removal, with hundreds of students demanding that their platform for free expression be restored.

Students are not letting this decision stand uncontested. They want the rocks back, and they will continue to find creative ways to demand this long after admin find it inconvenient. Muzzling perfectly lawful political speech or removing the rocks entirely is unacceptable. If UTD fails to honor students’ wishes and reinstate our avenue for self-expression, then it will never rebuild the trust it has broken with students.

To university admin: listen to students and reinstate the rocks immediately. It’s not too late to show Comets that you care about their voices.

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